SHORT STORIES

No. 760.] Week ending July 25th, 1903. [Price One Penny.

Glaring through the window was a weird-looking man, holding up a hand which had lost the tops of two fingers.

(A Dramatic Incident from the Story, "The Face at the Window." See inside.)

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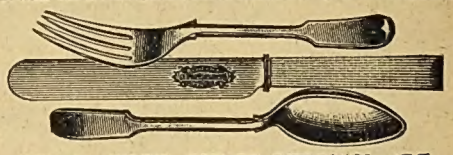

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Containing the incident depicted on the cover.

Short Stories

No. 760.] [One Penny.

For the Week Ending July 25th, 1903.

The Face at the Window.

Telling of a Ring and its History.

"Miss Moreton, Elsie! I must call you by that dear name! Let me tell you how I love you, how all-consuming is my passion! Nay, do not turn from me. Surely the objections which weighed in my disfavour eighteen months ago are no longer existent, and you can find some love, some pity, for me in your noble heart! Let me tell you what I have endured! Only let me plead my cause!"

The girl was startled by the passion that would show itself in spite of the speaker's efforts to suppress it. She saw the yearning look in his eyes, the agony of suspense in his whole countenance; at the first words she had involuntarily shrunk from his touch, although it was merely the placing of his hand lightly on her arm, but now came the revulsion of feeling. She was doing him an injustice and she was sorry.

"I am not turning from you, Mr. Kirke," she said hesitatingly. "But you startled me, and——" She stopped, but continued hurriedly as she observed that he was about to speak. "I was not expecting this! I feel that the time is hardly appropriate. My poor father has been dead scarcely twelve months, and Ralph——" Her lips quivered; she could say no more.

A strange expression flitted across his face; he bent over her hand and kissed it, and when he raised his head again his face was calm.

"It may seem so to you, Elsie," he said, more quietly and still making use of her Christian name. "To me, consumed by a passion which I can scarcely restrain, it is long, so long! Do not think that I wish you to forget those whom we both mourn, but would even they wish you to hug the cup of sorrow all through life! If they were not selfish——"

"Oh, no!" she broke in. "Ralph was the most unselfish of men, and my father too would not wish it. Yet it is not possible to efface grief so soon!"

Kirke bowed.

"Still, may I not dare hope that there is some chance of my having the supreme joy of devoting my life to making you happy? The tender memories will rise at times, but I shall not mind. Was not Ralph Moreton, your cousin, a friend to me? I did not grudge him his success in winning you, and I willingly stood aside; but since his untimely end, only a short time before that of your father, I have felt that I—— Elsie, dear, don't weep! I am so sorry!"

The tears had started to the girl's eyes. Fate had been very cruel to her during the past few months; she had lost her lover, who had died in Egypt, and her father, whose sudden death from heart failure had left her an orphan and heiress to much wealth.

The double blow had caused a breakdown in health, and had made her think that life had no further attraction for her. Youth, however, is buoyant, and time is a great healer or killer of pain, so she had recovered some of her old cheerfulness and much of her interest in life. Nevertheless, this incident had opened the old wounds and the pain was severe!

Basil Kirke watched her emotion with concealed vexation. His annoyance, it must be said, was tempered by a certain amount of gratification at the reflection that the girl had not rejected his advances; there was yet hope!

"I can afford to wait," he murmured inaudibly. "I have made the first open step, and I can go on! I may safely leave matters as they are for the moment; it will be unwise to push them further now."

Aloud, he said:

"Elsie, forgive me! I will not distress you by pleading my cause further. Some other time you will listen to me. I have bared my heart to you, and you will not wound it thoughtlessly?"

It was an artful speech, and had the desired effect. Elsie exclaimed:

"Oh, no, no! I feel so sorry for you, and I will try to——" Then she remembered the significance of her words and cut short the sentence in confusion.

Basil murmured something about leaving her to herself, and rose to depart. He shook hands with her and left the room; he knew the house well enough, and could let himself out as he had done before.

"Dear me!" So ran Basil Kirke's thoughts as he reached

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the hall and took his hat. "What a change in my sentiments. When she gently told me that she could not accept me, less than eighteen months ago, I wasn't so upset about not having her as I was because I saw that my rejection meant that I must do something more serious than love-making, and in another direction, if I was to get the old gentleman's money!

"But now I am really and truly in love with her, madly in love with her! I have risked the result of——" he involuntarily glanced round to see if even his thoughts had been overheard, and his face paled a little—"of what I did at great risk, in order to win that girl! I mean to have the money, but I want her as well *now!* Without her, what will it be?

"How strange that I should change so! What a wonderful power this sweet girl has obtained over me. I almost regret—— Bah! I can get through that! Sometimes her soft eyes will appear to be casting reproaches at me, but it will be nothing more than fancy on my part, for she will know nothing! How can she?"

He was staring at his reflection in the mirror in the hall-stand, staring without seeing; he came to himself with a start, and hurried towards the door.

As he placed his hand on the lock to open the door, he grated the knuckle of his forefinger against a sharp corner; it did not remove the skin, but he sprang back as if a serpent had bitten him.

"I had forgotten it," he said aloud, evidently referring to something other than the sharp corner on the lock. "Shall I ask her now or wait? Wait! No, it isn't safe; I ought to have asked for it sooner!"

Elsie was surprised to see him re-enter. She had dried her eyes, and was deep in thought.

"I came back to ask you what has become of that ring which I gave to your father on my return from the East," he told her. "Do you still keep it locked up in a box? I should like to destroy it! I always feel that it is unlucky and I reproach myself for having yielded to your father's love of curios. I have a creepy sort of feeling that it carries misfortune. Your father's death followed so soon after he had it, and I tremble now lest it should bring bad luck to you."

"Fancy you becoming superstitious!" Elsie smiled. "If it contained a wonderful stone which had once formed the eye of a wooden god in a temple and the Hindoos were after it, and so on—you know all the rest."

"Oh, there's nothing of that nonsense about it," he remarked, trying to imitate her light tone. "It didn't come from India at all; there's no stone in it, and it wouldn't fit the finger of an idol! No, you may rest quite easy on that score. Yet, I would rather have it and destroy it."

Elsie shook her head. "It hasn't brought ill-luck to me, and I have had it for a year in my box. It is quaint, and I thought I would wear it sometimes. See, I have it on now."

She stretched out her hand, at the same time he put forward his right hand as if to catch her arm; the movements were quick on both sides, and Elsie's hand slid along his cuff. His ear caught a grating sound, and he nearly cried aloud.

"What is the matter?" asked Elsie, noticing his perturbation.

Basil glanced hastily at his wrist and found that the skin was intact; on his shirt cuff was a scratch that seemed full of significance to him. He repressed a shudder with difficulty, and replied, in a voice that still showed signs of mental uneasiness:

"Oh, it is nothing. I must be a trifle shaken to-day—which is not extraordinary perhaps," he added, with a meaning glance. "Yes, I see that you are wearing the ring, and I want you to give it to me!"

"I will not encourage your superstitious fears," she retorted, with a laugh. "No, I have taken a fancy to it. It was a tight fit for my father's little finger, but it fits my third finger fairly well—just a little easy, but that is all. I intend to wear it to show that you are quite wrong!"

He was forced to give up the attempt, but his face was white and his expression hard, as he left the house.

Elsie took the ring from her finger and examined it. There was nothing particularly attractive about it; she wore it merely because it had belonged to her father, and it was taken from his lifeless fingers.

It was made of gold, with curious carved work all over it; in the place where a stone is usually set in rings of that shape, there was simply a boss of gold also carved with fine lines in fantastic patterns.

"I thought I heard it scratch something," she mused, her brows slightly contracting in the process of examining the hoop of gold. "And I thought once before that it caught in my dress. I don't see anything spiky, though!"

She replaced it on her finger and wore it till she retired for the night, when she put it back in the box where it had lain since her father's death.

"I will give way to his wishes," she said, a blush suffusing her cheeks. "Ought I to mourn so long? Perhaps I am wrong; perhaps I ought not to shut myself off from my fellow creatures, as I have been doing. And what am I to say to Basil Kirke? He has waited, faithful, to the words he spoke eighteen months ago. He still loves me—he loves me more than ever, if I read him aright! Oh, Ralph, Ralph, my love!"

She flung herself on her knees in front of a chair, above which hung the portrait of a handsome young man of three-and-twenty, strong, straight-forward, and bold; she buried her face in the cushions of the chair and wept.

Basil's persistence won for him a good place in the estimation of Elsie; she did not love him, but she recognised that she might do so in time. She threw off her sombre dress and emerged still more from retirement in order to accept the invitations which kind-hearted friends poured upon her.

She went to parties, to exclusive teas, and to many society functions, and she commenced to take much more interest in her surroundings.

Basil rejoiced; he was not rich—in fact, it was usually a struggle to prevent creditors from taking the final disagreeable step of issuing a summons for debt—yet he contrived to obtain invitations for most of the functions at which Elsie Moreton was present, and he engaged her attention as much as the conventionalities would permit.

At the end of another month he flattered himself that he was making splendid headway. True, Elsie had gently corrected him for using her front name, and he called her Miss Moreton, but she had done it in a way that suggested to him that he would have the right to call her Elsie before long.

The matter of the ring had only been mentioned once; that was when he asked her if she had put it safely away and she replied that it was in the little carved box on her dressing-table.

Elsie Moreton and the elderly lady who lived with her and managed the house, had arranged to attend a parochial entertainment on a particular Wednesday evening. On the very morning, Basil came to Elsie with three stall tickets

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for a special performance of a merry comic opera which was taking the town by storm, and he was visibly disappointed when he found that Elsie and "the dragon" could not go.

"I am very sorry, but I am positive that I mentioned this entertainment to you quite a week ago," protested Elsie. "How odd that you should have forgotten! Do you not recollect my telling you about the different things which the parish children had made? The poor children, I mean!"

Basil professed utter ignorance, but he passed the affair off lightly, saying that he would go alone. His face wore an expression the opposite of vexation when he left her presence and found himself alone.

Elsie and her escort attended the entertainment that evening, returning about half-past eleven. The two servants had been told not to sit up, as Miss Moreton and Miss Bland would take supper with the vicar after the entertainment and would be home late. The two ladies, therefore, let themselves in, and at once proceeded to their respective bedrooms.

Elsie was busy with her thoughts as she entered her own room, or she would have noticed that a light was burning. It was not till she had taken off her gloves and was extracting the pin from her hat that the fact struck her.

"How careless of Lydia," she murmured, moving towards a wardrobe in the corner. "She——"

At that moment, a muffled figure dashed from the wardrobe and made for the window. Elsie was a girl of considerable nerve, but this sudden appearance unnerved her for a moment, and in that time the intruder had reached the window, threw it open, and scrambled out.

Recovering herself quickly, Elsie sprang after him, but was too late; the burglar had dropped to the ledge overhanging the door, and from this point easily reached the ground. Elsie raised an alarm, but it was too late, and the robber escaped.

In the confusion and excitement that followed, Elsie was the only one of the four who kept her self-possession.

While a maid summoned a policeman, she examined her room to see what had been taken. Certainly it would be jewellery, which the thief could easily slip into his pockets, for he had taken no parcel with him, and he had not left a packed bag in the hiding place from which he had been driven by Elsie's approach.

She looked in her boxes, but nothing was missing. How fortunate! She had disturbed him. She shut up the boxes, but another thought took possession of her, and she again looked in the carved box in which she kept the strange ring; it was gone!

Elsie was puzzled. Why should anyone rob her of that ring? There were others far more valuable in the same box. For an instant the old story of Hindoos tracking and recovering a consecrated treasure came to her mind, but she dismissed it with disdain. That was no Hindoo whom she had disturbed, A Hindoo would have done the thing more artfully. It was a mystery.

Elsie decided not to mention the fact to the policeman, so that official looked important, and decided that the rascal had been disturbed before he had had time to plunder the house. He promised that inquiry would be made, but Elsie seized the chance and said that she did not wish to be further troubled, as she had lost nothing.

It was two days later when Basil came to tell her about the performance, and to hear her account of the parochial entertainment. He also brought two invitations to a ball to be held a week later.

"I want you to come with me!" he pleaded. "Will you?"

It would be tantamount to an announcement of their engagement, but somehow she could not resist. She seemed to be under a fascination; the fierce passion that lighted up his eyes acted strangely upon her.

Moreover, she was upset by the theft of the ring; now that the excitement had worn off, the mystery disquieted her. Perhaps there was some tragedy connected with that golden hoop, after all!

Perhaps—horrible thought!—it was not unconnected with her father's death! She felt that she was becoming hysterical, and she was glad of his protection.

She told him of the mysterious occurrence, and he looked very grave.

"I am thankful that it is gone," he said, and his tone was so sincere that it admitted of no doubt. Then he saw his advantage and he took it. "I should never forgive myself if I once became convinced that it was that ring which brought about your father's death!" he cried vehemently. "And to think that it was I who gave it to him."

Tender-hearted Elsie responded immediately.

"It wouldn't have been your fault in any case," she said gently. "It was done in ignorance; and, even supposing the idea to be correct, the responsibility rests with those who encompassed his death, and not with the innocent giver of the ring. But all this is foolishness on my part; I am distraught; we will not talk of it any more."

The subject was dropped, but, try as she would, Elsie could not entirely rid herself of the sensation of dread that had attacked her. She was easily startled now; sometimes the slamming of a door made her jump. The "dragon" insisted that a change of scene was necessary, and it was decided that they should have it after the ball.

The change did come after the ball, but it was different from their expectations.

Elsie roused herself for that night; she looked radiantly lovely, and created no small amount of envy among less physically-gifted and less wealthy young ladies; Basil was envied for his good luck by half the men present, and he knew it, but this made him the more happy.

It was a brilliant success, every dance on Elsie's card was claimed, and she had to dance them all. The music, the intoxication of exquisite dancing, and all the other attributes of a ball of that description had their effect on her, and she banished care and sorrow in order to enjoy life to the full.

The only bar to Basil's thorough enjoyment was the fact that he did not get a chance of drawing Elsie into the conservatory in order to ask her to be his wife.

"I must try to get my opportunity this evening!" he murmured. "I ought not to let this evening slip! But how? The dragon will be in the carriage with us!"

He left the ladies in order to make inquiry about the carriage, and returned with a look of vexation plainly visible on his countenance.

"There seems to have been some misunderstanding," he said gloomily. "Our carriage has not arrived! It is past the stated time, so I fear that it will not come. I have had to hunt up two hansom cabs! Couldn't do better!"

He conducted them to the entrance, and, by some manipulation and before Miss Bland realised what had happened, he placed her in one cab and sent it off, thus securing Elsie for himself. He was very careful about placing her in the conveyance, allowing her ample time to arrange her dress so as to avoid undue crushing, and then he got in, and away they went by another route. Basil was exultant; here was his opportunity, and he would make use of it as soon as they were fairly on the way.

"It's a good maxim that says you can *make* opportunities if you have a mind to do so!" he thought.

He turned to Elsie. Her face had lost its animation; some-

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thing seemed to oppress her. The sentiment appeared to affect him also; it was like a damp cloud falling round them, a premonition of coming evil.

He endeavoured to shake it off, and opened his lips to speak, but a frightened cry from Elsie caused him to look in the same direction. The sight filled him with terror.

Glaring at him through the window of the cab, with the light shining full upon him, was a man—a man with a weird aspect, wearing a strange head-covering, and holding up a hand which had lost the tops of two fingers!

The apparition vanished, and Basil fell back in the cab, shaking with fear. Elsie, greatly frightened also, was unable to say anything.

Basil did not recover his self-possession. The cab reached its destination, the dragon was ready to receive Elsie, but Basil could only muster up strength to shout out his own address and the cab rolled away, leaving the astonished women looking after it in blank surprise!

Elsie waited for Basil Kirke to appear on the following morning and make some explanation and apology, but when the visitor was announced by the maid it was in these words: "A gentleman wishes to see you, miss; but he will not give his name."

Before Elsie could reply, the stranger pushed his way in and the maid retired.

"Ralph!" Elsie gasped. "Ralph! I thought——"

Then she fainted in the arms of the lover whom she had believed to be dead.

"But how is it?" she asked later. "How did the horrid mistake occur, and how——"

"I came upon you too suddenly!" he interrupted regretfully. "I couldn't wait. I will tell you all about it.

"Basil Kirke tried to kill me. He wanted money, and he had resolved to have it. He determined to get rid of those who stood in his way—me, your father, and yourself! If I died, your father would leave all his money to you, and I should not be able to marry you, naturally. As you had rejected him once, so spoiling the chance of getting the money easily, he thought you would refuse again, and you were to be sacrificed!

"He did it, as he thought, by means of that ring. It had a receptacle under that boss of gold, with a tiny spring which, when the ring was pressed, caused a tiny point to protrude and scratch. That point, when hidden, rested in poison of the most virulent type.

"A mere scratch would cause death in two or three minutes, and the symptoms of death were those of syncope! You probably never discovered it, but when the upper part of the ring was pressed against the finger on which the ring was placed, that pressure caused the point to protrude from the outer and upper portion of the ring, ready to scratch!

"He tried it on me, and scratched me. My Hindoo servant sucked the poison out of the wound, for he knew what it was. Basil came in just in time to see him doing it, and he scratched the faithful fellow on the upper joint of two fingers. To save himself from death, the Hindoo lopped off the top joints without hesitation.

"Basil fled, believing that we should both die; but the Hindoo was safe, and he had done enough for me to preserve my life. The effect of the poison on me, however, was to rob me of reason and keep me in bodily weakness for many months."

"But why did someone not send word home?" asked Elsie.

"Because Basil had robbed me of all my belongings that might have shown my identity, and my servant, having been engaged by me as a temporary help in Egypt, knew nothing about me. Then we came home, and my servant tracked Basil, and saw him in the cab last night.

"In the meantime I had learnt, with the greatest grief, that your father had fallen a victim! Yes, it was so!

"Basil fell madly in love with you, and that fact saved you! He tried to win you, and so spoilt his own plan. Thank Heaven! He was arrested this morning, and confessed his infamy. The ring is in his possession now, it seems."

"Then it was he who entered my room the other night."

"Yes," returned Ralph gravely. "Now let us forget it. We are re-united and we will strive to make each other happy after much suffering, dear!"

George Day.

METCALF'S BOOMERANG.

Which Brought Great Trouble on his Household.

"Mrs. Metcalf," said the magistrate, "do I understand that you make a charge of assault and battery against Mr. Metcalf?"

"Not exactly, your worship; you see——"

"One minute," said Metcalf. "Permit me to explain the matter. Is your worship acquainted with the Australian boomerang?"

"Yes, I am."

"Well, you will know that the peculiarity of the boomerang is when you throw it forward it flies backward and hits something behind you."

"When you throw it behind you what does it do?"

"Comes straight to the front. On Tuesday I bent the kitchen poker into the boomerang shape and began to study the scientific aspects of this remarkable weapon."

"What for?"

"Partly for the sake of developing scientific truth, partly for the purpose of killing ducks. If I want to kill a duck with a boomerang what do I do? I walk away from him. I go off in the opposite direction. This lulls suspicion in the duck's mind. Suddenly I take careful aim, say at Jones' man who is chopping wood in the next yard. I let fly, and the first thing you know is that the boomerang has gone whooping over my shoulder and killed the duck—dead—dead—dead as Julius Cæsar. It's one of the most beautiful sights in the world."

"Did you ever kill one that way?"

"Well, that is just the point. No, I did not. I am practising. This is what has excited Mrs. Metcalf. Wednesday morning, while I was in the yard trying the thing, I forgot. I aimed at the bird-cage in the porch, and the poker went over my head and straight through the kitchen window. I apologised to Mrs. Metcalf, and tried again. This time I aimed right at the kiethen window, intending to hit the bird-cage behind me. The boomerang must have got twisted somehow, for the scientific principle was temporarily suspended, and she went bang through the kitchen window again."

"Did it strike Mrs. Metcalf?"

"Struck her head, your worship. But I explained and bent the poker back to the proper angle. Then I aimed at the pump and let her fly. She went up, turned over, flew behind me, and nearly brained Matilda, the servant girl, who was coming out of the coal cellar with a scuttle of coals, unhappily, at that moment."

"Where is Matilda?"

"In the hospital. She is having a trepan—a kind of trap-door let into her skull. She will sue me as soon as she comes out. It is hard to suffer for scientific truth."

"But have you managed to hit any ducks yet?"

"I'll tell you. I caught a duck and tied it down to a gooseberry bush. I projected the boomerang at that duck two hundred and seventy-three times, not counting once when it slipped. I hit everything within forty feet of the bird; I hit all the loose ducks and chickens; I smashed the glass in the hot-bed; I sent the poker twice through a sheet on the clothes-line; I dug up all the flower-beds, smashed eleven flower pots, ruined two young peach trees, broke the top off the pump, and maimed one pet dog for life, but I never hit my particular duck once, I don't know why. Probably I haven't got the hang of the thing yet."

"And Mrs. Metcalf wants you to stop practising, does she?"

"Yes, sir. But I'm going to learn, if I have to go out to Australia to get the knack of it."

"Well, I hold you in £100 not to fling that boomerang again outside Australia until you learn how."

"Very well, your worship, but I'll leave for there by the first train to-morrow."

O. P. Arson.

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THE MAKING OF A MATCH.

How a Blind Girl Helped Two Lovers.

EVERY day the blind girl sat in her accustomed place facing the park.

She sold matches in little blue boxes at a penny each. A gentleman who lived at one of the houses close by frequently gave her sixpence for a box, and he never omitted to wish her "Good morning!" when he passed, and he talked to her as if she could see like other people, which pleased her very much, and she looked for his coming. She would lift her small face to him and smile as she thanked him, her beautiful blue eyes gazing blankly into his.

A card was round her neck hung by an old piece of black ribbon, bearing the words, "Totally blind."

The girl knew her benefactor's footsteps quite well; she could easily distinguish them from many others on the pavement at the same time.

She felt sure he was young, his step was so buoyant—and rich, for he constantly rode in cabs—and handsome, with curly hair, and dark eyes, like the heroes of stories that her grandmother read to her.

One day he asked her if she liked flowers, and when she said yes he gave her his button-hole, which was a beautiful gardenia, and she took it home that night and the grandmother pronounced it to be a "camilla," but in her young day she said they never smelt nice like this one. After that he constantly gave her his button-hole when he came home about seven o'clock before going out again.

One afternoon he had ladies to tea with him. They alighted from a carriage just beside the blind girl. Their dresses rustled, and they smelt deliciously of scent.

"Remember, Violet," one said, "it is no good your ever thinking of Harold St. Leger, he is only a younger son."

The other one laughed as she answered:

"My dear mother, he has not proposed to me yet." They went up the steps and the blind girl heard no more.

In about an hour's time they came out again and the harsher voice was thanking their host volubly for "such a pleasant time," and the silent listener on the pavement imagined the speaker was getting into her carriage as the gentleman said in an undertone, she thought, to the other lady, "Till to-morrow!—all the waltzes after No. 10."

There was no answer audible, and the carriage drove away.

The blind girl knew quite well that waltzes were dances, and dances were associated in her mind with beautiful piano-organs, which came and played in their street, and thrilled her strangely.

The music gave her visions of a world where no one was blind, and the men and women were like angels who danced all day long with rhythmic motions, in diaphanous draperies—and sang beautiful songs.

The blind girl helped to support her grandmother, who was bedridden but active enough in mind.

Jane kept her informed of the doings of the outside world in which the older woman had never lost her interest since she had been housemaid in "good families."

The girl would tell her of the crowds of carriages, the silk dresses which rustled by her, and little snatches of conversation which she overheard; and the shoutings of the newspaper boys were never missed. The old woman liked to hear of the great people who died and was duly interested in any "'orrible crime."

Jane told her of the kind gentleman who gave her sixpences instead of pennies, and the grandmother speculated as to who he could be; she surmised he was a "Member of Parliament," which was the greatest honour she could confer on him, for she had lived ten years in the family of a rich M.P., and she never tired of talking of the parties they gave in the season.

Jane had been doing very well lately, and as it was summer her grandmother thought the girl should have a new ribbon round her well-worn sailor hat and she commissioned a friendly neighbour to purchase a small length of a nice "maginta" or blue ribbon—blue of the shade known as "rial," for choice.

With the encouragement of the new adornment Mrs. Richards bade her granddaughter find out who her unknown benefactor was.

That morning the familiar footsteps approached as usual about eleven o'clock, but, alas! they passed her by without a greeting. He did not take a hansom that morning and she noticed that he walked slowly and heavily.

About two o'clock, when the streets were quieter, he came back, but not alone, and with him walked one of the ladies who had had tea with him—the one who had the nicer voice. The girl recognised her by the perfume she used. They walked up and down in front of the camp stool and its occupant, who heard their conversation quite clearly.

"Mother says if I don't marry Stornoway she will take me abroad at once, and I shall certainly never be allowed to write to you."

"Oh, darling, why am I doomed to poverty? Why am I not my elder brother?"

"I should not like you if you were."

"And I am not rich enough to give you the luxuries you ought to have."

"Oh, yes, you are, I know my own requirements; all the same, Harold, just at present I dare not see you again, it will be better for us not to meet for a bit."

"It is like starving a man—and I can't even have a crumb of comfort in the shape of a letter."

"No, dear; but trust me as I trust you."

"I do, darling."

"Good-bye!" and the blind girl imagined their hands were clasped; then the lady hurried away and the "gentleman" went straight to his house and the door slammed.

The next day he came as usual and walked straight to Jane.

"Good morning. Where's my box of matches?" and he tendered sixpence.

"Here, sir." And the blind girl lifted her sightless blue eyes to his face as she handed him a box.

He lit a cigarette.

"Isn't it awfully dull sitting here all day?"

"No, sir."

"Would you like me to try to get you into a home where they teach you to make all sorts of things?"

She hesitated before replying. "No, thank you, sir. I should miss the streets; it is so cheerful 'ere."

"Ye gods!" the man involuntarily exclaimed, "I wish I possessed your philosophy."

Jane Richards had the magenta ribbon in her hat and she remembered the grannie's injunctions to discover "the gentleman's" identity.

"Please, sir," she said timidly, "are you a lord?"

The man laughed outright.

"No; why do you ask?"

"Me and grandmother was wondering who you are. Grandmother expects you are a Member of Parliament."

The man laughed again.

"Oh, no, I am nothing but a younger son—my father is a lord, but that's no help to me—it is rather a drawback. I have two brothers older than myself."

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Jane was breathless with interest, but he was not disposed to tell her any more of the family history; he changed the conversation by asking her if she would like some fruit.

The blind girl hesitated—this time from shyness, but she finally said she would.

"Very well, come into my house, and my housekeeper will give you anything you like."

Very gently he led her up the steps, and when his man appeared bade him tell Mrs. Stiggins to give her whatever she liked to eat and drink.

This was a great day of events to detail to grannie, but she knew she would be disappointed that "the gentleman" was not a "Member of Parliament."

The London season was drawing to a close—on a Friday evening towards the end of July the evening newspapers had only one special piece of information to impart to their readers, and this the small boys shouted to the detriment of their vocal organs:

"Engigement of Lord Stonway!"

"Son of the Markiss of Ross about to marry!"

The door of the Hon. Harold St. Leger's house was opened and he himself called a paper boy, and then the door closed again. The blind girl heard. She, too, asked a boy for a paper as he passed her.

"Yer can't see to read," he jeered.

"No, but here's an 'apenny if yer'll jest read me the name of the lady that's going to marry that lord."

And the boy condescendingly spelt out the name of the Hon. Violet Staples.

The blind girl's heart beat with excitement and sympathy for "the gentleman."

Luggage was lifted on to a cab the next morning and he went away without a word of farewell to her.

The heat was stifling. Jane asked the girl who fetched her in the evenings not to come till nine o'clock as she got more air sitting there than in the stuffy little rooms at home.

It was nearly nine one evening a week later, when a cab dashed up and a lady hastily alighted, dismissed the hansom, stood still a moment, then walked a few steps one way, then as quickly turned and walked back again.

He placed an exquisite bouquet in her lap.

The blind girl instantly recognised the familiar rustle of her skirts, accompanied by a perfume which reminded her of lilac.

Up and down, up and down went the footsteps. Jane could hear her breathing rapidly, and occasionally she stamped her foot on the pavement in an agony of impatience.

"Can he have gone?" she murmured half-aloud. "He said if I was not here by eight o'clock he would know there was no hope," and she referred to a letter crushed in her hand.

The blind girl decided on action, and guided by a stick and her ears, she approached the lady.

"I beg pardon, ma'am, but the gentleman 'as gone—he went about a quarter of an hour ago."

The lady started.

"What do you mean? How do you know I am waiting for anyone?" she asked guardedly but eagerly.

"I 'spected you were, as I thought 'e was waiting for someone too. I know the gentleman—'e is very kind to me."

The lady gasped.

"Then he has gone, I couldn't get here at eight o'clock, and now I am too late! Oh, what shall I do?"

"The address 'e gave the cabman was 4 Grindley Street, ma'am. I 'ear wonderful well, although I can't see."

"Oh, my good girl, how can I thank you!" And the lady grasped the blind girl's hand. The next moment she was hailing a passing hansom, and before she got in she took a sovereign from her purse and pressed it into Jane's hand.

"No thank you, ma'am, the gentleman is very kind to me. I'd rather not take it, ma'am, thank you."

"4 Grindley Street, and drive as quickly as you can," was the order given, and the blind girl heard the horse being thrashed, and it galloped away.

A feeling of great pride and happiness surged through Jane's simple soul to think that she had been the means of helping the pretty lady (she felt sure she was pretty) and the "kind gentleman."

The next morning the Hon. Harold St. Leger ran hastily down the steps of his house. His feet had regained all their old buoyancy. He went straight to the blind girl and he took her hand, and he pressed it warmly.

"What a kind and clever girl you are! All through you I am the happiest man in the world," he lowered his voice—"this morning I am going to be married to the lady to whom you gave my address last night; no one will know till it is all over but you! Her mother wanted her to marry someone she didn't love, but instead she is going to be my wife."

"Oh, sir, I am so glad."

"But if you had not acted so splendidly as you did by going to her and telling her that address it would have been too late, for I was afraid she would have to marry another man, and this morning I was going right away abroad. So you can imagine with what gratitude we look on you—and my future wife says she wants you and your grandmother to have a little cottage in the country quite close to our house."

"Oh, sir, I would like that. I have never 'eard birds sing or smelt 'ay growing in fields."

A few hours later a carriage and pair pulled up in front of her and someone alighted and placed in her lap an exquisite bouquet of gardenias and lilies and tuberoses.

The footsteps were familiar, but they had gone before she had time to thank the giver. But Jane knew it was the bride's bouquet, and her heart was full of pride, and she strained her ears to catch the sound of wedding bells which she knew must be ringing somewhere for "the gentleman" and his lady.

Ella MacLachlan.

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Barbara's Choice.

Telling of a Test of True Love.

"FATHER, may I have a word with you?"

"Certainly, Neil; what is it?" said Lord Ralston, glancing up from his paper, and then—frowning slightly as he caught the expression on his son's face—"Not another scrape, I hope?"

The Honourable Neil caught his underlip in his teeth—a characteristic trick of his when annoyed.

"I trust I don't quite deserve that, sir," he said reproachfully. "Upon my word, I've tried my best to be decent, and it's nearly two years since you had occasion to reprimand me."

"Well, now I think of it," replied the Earl, "you have certainly been pretty quiet of late. But—what is it then?"

Now, although the young man's eagerness to unburden himself was obvious from his manner, yet the abruptness of the question seemed to disconcert him not a little. He blushed all over his handsome, sun-tanned face, and thereupon commenced stammering something, the portent of which was more or less lost in his heavy military moustache.

For a moment the Earl regarded him doubtfully, his whitening eyebrows slightly elevated in surprise; but by the time his son had managed to articulate a fairly audible sentence they had dropped to the other extreme in a heavy frown of displeasure.

"I—I—the fact is, father, I want your consent to ask the lady, with whom you saw me yesterday, to be my wife."

It was out at last, and, hot and eager, the young guardsman stood—a disgrace to his regiment by reason of the limp absurdity of his pose—awaiting a reply. With irritating deliberation the Earl rose from his seat and carefully adjusted his eye-glasses.

"H'm," he grumped. "In the first place, Neil, what do you know of the young—er—lady's connections? Does her father follow any profession, or is he a gentleman at ease?"

"Mr. St. Moyes has been very unfortunate," said his son shortly. "He is, I believe, at present somewhere on the Continent."

"H'm!" grumped the Earl again. "Something somewhere on the Continent, eh? Probably a billiard-marker at Boulogne. Nice prospect, certainly! And the mother—is she on the Continent too?"

The whole sentence was one concentrated sneer, and the young man flushed hotly.

"Mrs. St. Moyes," he rapped out, "is too great an invalid to receive anyone. I have never seen her."

"So," commented Lord Ralston sweetly. "Father unfortunate, mother an invalid—promising relations, upon my word."

He fell to pacing the room with measured strides, his chin incircled by a lean finger. All at once he stopped, and, bending slightly, stared down at a photograph standing among several others on a small table near the door. It represented a young lady of very considerable beauty, posing in the costume of a bygone century.

"I don't remember that you mentioned the lady's *profession*," remarked the Earl, abruptly recovering the perpendicular, and resuming his perambulations. The inflexion was indescribable, and his listener visibly writhed.

"I never could see," began he, with some warmth, "why the Stage should be deemed such a discreditable profession. However undesirable it may have been in the past, rest assured, sir, it is very different now."

"Ah, well," replied the Earl languidly, "we won't go into that at present, I think."

And, dropping his eye-glass with a shrug, he resumed his seat.

The Honourable Neil pulled himself together before replying.

"I want you to understand, sir," he began resolutely, "that I have permanently made up my mind. I am determined, come what may, to marry Barbara St. Moyes; but would, of course, prefer to do so with your full consent."

Practised diplomatist that he was, Lord Ralston showed neither anger nor surprise.

"I presume, then, that you have already obtained the lady's consent?" he said tentatively.

"Well—no," admitted the young man. "You see, Barbara will not definitely accept my offer until she knows your views about the matter; so you can understand that I am anxious to know my fate."

The Earl rose, and laid a hand on his son's shoulder.

"My boy," he said, "all my wishes are for your happiness. However, this thing can scarcely be settled out of hand; for instance, there is your mother to be consulted. Suppose we leave it over until to-morrow? Come, now."

The young man looked his disappointment, nevertheless he bowed acquiescence. After all, twenty-four hours would soon pass; and besides, nothing could ever affect his determination to marry Barbara—nothing—nothing—never!

It had gone hard with better men than Neil in their attempts to outwit his distinguished father, so there was no necessity for the young man to call himself hard names when, the next morning, he discovered that Lord Ralston had left town "on urgent business connected with his estate."

Nevertheless, he did so anathematise himself—reviling his stupidity in not having clinched matters the day before. However, there it was, and there was now nothing for it but to possess his soul in patience until the Earl should return.

Very little time sufficed to put Lord Ralston in possession of ample information concerning Miss St. Moyes.

Her father, it seemed, at one time an artist of repute, had suddenly developed a mania for drink and gambling, thereby destroying all his chances of success, and ultimately resulting in his flight from the country, leaving his wife and daughter to manage as best they might. Ever since his desertion, some four years ago, Barbara had been obliged to exploit her histrionic gifts in order to procure a livelihood for herself and her invalid mother.

"H'm!" murmured the noble Earl. "There oughtn't to be much difficulty in disposing in these undesirables. Dissolute father, ailing mother, devoted daughter. I don't think I'm far wrong in crediting this damsel with sense enough to see that 'a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush.' I'll try

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it, anyhow." Having delivered himself of which enigmatic utterance Lord Ralston rang the bell.

An hour or so later Miss St. Moyes was waited on in her flat at Kensington by a gentleman of polished manners and pleasing speech, who adroitly conveyed the intimation that, in the event of a permanent cessation of her intimacy, with a certain youthful scion of a noble house, a sum of not less than ten thousand pounds would be forthcoming, and no questions asked.

With swiftly growing indignation she heard him out, and then, springing up and facing him like a tragedy queen, she gave him her mind so vigorously that, with a nervous clutch at his hat, her visitor flashed out of the room, and gained the street with all speed.

Lord Ralston received the news of this initial rebuff with a smile, but not so the curt note he received from Neil a few hours later, containing the information that, owing to certain discreditable conduct on the part of a distinguished member of His Majesty's Government, Miss Barbara St. Moyes had decided to accept him (Neil) unconditionally.

By no means disconcerted at the unexpected turn affairs had taken Lord Ralston coolly played his next card; with the result that, a few days later, Barbara's name figured among the list of distinguished guests at Rotherfield Hall, the Earl's country seat.

Now poverty, with its endless shifts and contrivances, is apt to have a narrowing effect on the possibilities of a woman's nature; consequently, amid the luxury and refinement of her new surroundings, the little actress—conscious that at last she had found her true element—fairly revelled in the delights of the moment; determining that, if it lay in her to prevent it, the old life should never see her again.

The announcement of her engagement to Neil had been fixed for the end of the month, that arrangement, though she knew it not, being part and parcel of a deep-laid scheme, emanating from the fertile brain of the distinguished host, by which he hoped to be permanently rid of her at the end of that time.

Meanwhile, lulled into a false sense of security by reason of the charming treatment meted out to her on every hand, she thoroughly enjoyed herself.

By no means the least attentive member of the company was the noble Earl himself, who, several times took her over the estate, explaining at length the working of the huge coal-mine from which he derived a large portion of his income.

One thing, however, Barbara noticed, though without troubling herself to account for it, and that was that the Earl in the course of his remarks, was continually drawing comparisons between his own property and that of Sir George Meldrum, who owned the adjoining estate; and always greatly to the disadvantage of the former.

"Really, my dear young lady," he said on one occasion; "you should see Sir George's place! Why the fellow could buy me up twice over. He's the coal-king of the county, you know; whereas I possess but a single mine, and if anything happened to the place I should be practically a pauper."

It may, or it may not have been this newly-acquired knowledge that Sir George Meldrum was the "coal-king" which made Barbara so ineffably gracious to him throughout the whole of that evening.

The middle-aged Baronet had been a frequent visitor during Barbara's stay at Rotherfield Hall, and had contrived, one way and another, to pay more attention to that lady than the Honourable Neil quite liked.

Barbara found Sir George a distinctly pleasant, if rather ordinary sort of man, and as for the fact of his being a bachelor, that affected her neither one way nor the other, even if she ever gave it a thought.

She never quite knew what prompted her to sit out that last dance with him. Suffice it to say that, wearied by her previous exertions, she had suffered herself to be led away, and that the next thing she realised was that the Baronet was pouring out protestations of eternal love, with an earnestness that at once startled and repelled her.

Vexed that he had not known of her position, and angry with herself for having behaved to him in such a manner as to justify the course he had taken, she was about to disillusion him in a few well-chosen words when the sound of approaching footsteps fell upon her ears.

"A terrible thing," came in the deep tones of a man. "The workings are flooded . . . mine's no earthly use now . . . Poor old Ralston, I'm afraid he'll never survive it. Poverty comes hard to men like him!"

No more; the voices passed out of earshot. Stunned and dazed, Barbara tried to realise what it was that had happened.

Gradually out of the whirling chaos of ideas, her mind grasped the salient fact—that with her lay the choice—of poverty, with its mean surroundings, or of wealth, with all that makes life worth living. Poverty, want, and weariness; the cramped stuffiness of rooms in a suburban street; the hideous alliteration of a life of endless toil. The prospect sickened her.

Her mother too; how could she tell her that it had all come to an end? That the future held nothing for them but what was grey and gaunt and sordid. Oh, the unspeakable horror of it!

"Dearest," murmured the low, persuasive voice at her side, "may I take silence for consent?"

She came to herself then, and remembered. Neil loved her. Before all the beautiful women of his own set he had chosen her—the little actress. She could bring him nothing—nothing—but her beauty, her purity, and her love; his was the sacrifice. And she did love him? Oh, yes, yes! more than anything; more than all the wealth and luxury the wide world held; more than life itself!

"Oh, no, no!" she breathed. "Sir George, I am deeply conscious of the honour you do me, but—oh—it cannot be!" And then in a moment she was up and speeding from him as a wild thing flees from the foot of man.

* * * * *

"Oh, Neil, Neil!"—she was sobbing in his arms—"don't let it make any difference, dear. We are young, and we can work; and oh, my darling, I want you more than anything. Poverty doesn't matter if I have you."

* * * * *

The flooding of the mine did not prove such a serious affair after all; being, as a matter of fact, confined to a single "working" and a disused one at that. Also, when four men met in conclave in the Hall library, some things were said which threw a somewhat startling light on the occurrence in question. Two of the number were well-known sporting characters, the third was Sir George Meldrum, and the fourth was the Earl himself.

"All I've got to say," remarked one of the former, "is that the filly came out of the test well. You should have seen her jump though when Charlie, here, laid it on thick about the 'poverty.'"

The Earl smiled.

"Nothing like a trial to bring out the quality, is there?" he said.

"There isn't," agreed Sir George. "But"—with a comical grimace—"I half wish she'd disappointed you, Ralston, after all. I could have done with her myself."

"You!" laughed the Earl. "She's heaps too good for you. Look here, boys; that youngster of mine has hooked a treasure. I'm sure of it now; and although it's cost me over thirty pounds to flood that blessed 'working,' I don't regret it."

Barry Sheil.

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A BREACH OF CONFIDENCE.

Telling of how it Brought About a Wedding.

SHE sat with her pen in her hand, but she could not write. Her heart was full of a story that she had heard recently and could not forget—the story of a woman who had been happier than herself, and yet more miserable. She stared at the blank paper before her instead of writing, and she said to herself:

"Why are all the chances in life given to those who are not fit to use them? If such a love had been mine once I would never have let it go. There is no price that I would not have paid to keep it; and she—she threw it away for vanity!"

The story was very real to her, because she loved the man who had told it, and yet she had taken the telling of it to mean that the true history of his life was over, and that he had no love left to give again. The confidence he had reposed in her had been a compliment to her friendship, but a destruction of all her hopes of happiness. Before that confidence was made she had thought that his feeling for her was as deep as hers for him.

She had been married herself; but, though she had had a husband, she had never known true love.

Her marriage had been a sacrifice, made when she was very young, and when she acted almost entirely under the influence of a selfish mother. Her husband proved selfish, too, and—which was worse in her mother's eyes—not so prosperous as had been imagined.

Eleanor's life had been a hard one always, and now she was left alone in the world, except for the little two years' old baby. It was an ailing creature, fretful, and not pretty; but it was something to hold in her arms, if not enough to fill her heart.

She loved it the more passionately perhaps for its infirmities; but sometimes the loneliness of her life overpowered her like a flood of bitter waters; she wanted some mind to speak to, some heart to answer hers.

She was yet very young, only twenty-two years old, and all the currents of life beat strongly within her; all the imperative demands for love, for praise, for happiness, which make so large a part of our youth, were still alive in her heart, and would not easily be silenced.

Her income was insufficient for herself and her delicate child; she added to it in many little ways, as the opportunity was offered to her. She had written a few short stories for a new magazine, which could not yet afford to number famous authors among its contributors, and she had been paid for them.

An accidental meeting with another occasional contributor had given her a friend; and Ralph Webster was at that time, perhaps, the only person with whom she was on terms of familiar friendship, and to whom she could talk on a moral and intellectual level.

His sympathies and aspirations were not unlike her own; they always understood one another at least, even when they did not agree. To talk to him was, therefore, the opening of a new experience to her.

Language had before—at least, spoken language—been only a vehicle for the management of affairs, the expression of desires, the receipt of information. Now it served to exchange thought, to bring two lives into close mental relation with one another, to console, to suggest, to sustain. And she had thought he loved her.

He was a little more prosperous in the world than herself, and he did not guess that she was so very poor; but he was not rich enough to make her feel that she would take much more than she gave if she became his wife. They would work together, as they lived together and loved together. She had thought, with others:

Our work shall still be better for our love,
And still our love be sweeter for our work,
And both commended, for the sake of each,
By all true workers and true lovers born.

And then he had received an appointment to travel as a special correspondent of a metropolitan daily, and he had come to say good-bye to her, and before saying good-bye, had told her this story. She had taken it for a final farewell.

Since his going, three days before, she had thought of nothing else. She had work to do, but she could not do it. How could she throw herself into dream-loves and dream-troubles with this pain of loss and loneliness at her heart? And yet the work was necessary, and she dared not delay it longer than that night.

She had, the day before, received back from her editor a story which she had hoped he would accept, with the intimation that if she would write him one half as long, to be ready in two days, he would almost certainly take it, as he wished to fill up a corresponding gap in the next number of his magazine.

She urgently needed the money. Her baby, little Lorna, was paler and thinner even than usual; the doctor whom she consulted said that the child needed country air. She had hoped to earn enough money to take it away for some weeks to a farm-house, when she sent that story to the editor of the magazine. She must not lose the opportunity which he had offered in its place.

She had thought of a plot—a foolish little, common-place affair—but she could not breathe any life into it. When she forced her thoughts into the necessary channel they flowed back again to another story.

She saw Ralph Webster standing before her; she heard his voice again, telling her the simple tragedy of his life. How graphically he had told it, though not with many words! She could fill in the details for herself.

It was a story of true and patient love, and of shameful faithlessness and falsehood; a story in which the wrong-doer pitied herself and fancied herself a victim, while she accepted her husband's sacrifice and spoilt his life. She had been cruel to him with the cruelty which demands everything, and gives less than nothing in return.

"And yet," said Ralph, when he told the story—he had never repeated it to anyone before—"I never ceased to love her while she lived; and when she died the world seemed empty to me. I suppose it was only this, that I could never take back what I had once given."

There was not much in the story itself, but it held Eleanor's thoughts fast, and would not let them go; because the love that had been so scorned and wasted would have made the happiness of her life.

She must write her tale, but how? She could not cast into its foolish incidents the burning thoughts that possessed her; these were all woven about another thread.

And while she still thought, her child cried, and she had to leave her work to soothe it. She lay down on the bed beside it, and fell asleep. She awoke in the dead of the night.

The anxious thought which watches ever beside the pillow of the unhappy leapt at once to its place in her mind, giving her no respite. "You must write your story," it said. She got up with the resolution of despair, and went back to the table.

"I will write this," she said, "and have done with it."

There was no difficulty now. The facts in her mind ranged themselves instantly into dramatic shape; living words—

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words that throbbed with her own love, and pain, and regret, and longing, shaped themselves into eager thought.

When vain desire at last, and vain regret,
Go hand-in-hand to death, and all is vain.

That was the burden of the writing, and it was a very old one; but it seemed new now, because she wrote it with all her heart.

When dawn broke she had eased herself of the phantom that had haunted her, and was free. How strange it is, this relief that comes to some of us after we have put into words the thoughts that torment us! She was free now, and she wrote the other story—her tale for the magazine; but she knew that it was a miserable affair.

Lorna was worse that morning. Her mother took her into her arms and looked into her suffering face.

"If I keep her here she will leave me, too," she said to herself. "I shall have nothing left."

She wrapped up her manuscript and took it herself to the editor. She wanted to bring his answer back. He was, in fact, waiting for the story, to put it in the hands of the printer, and he was willing to look at it at once. She sat and watched him as he did so, with very little hope in her face. He read it carefully at first, then he turned over the pages rapidly, and finally put the manuscript down.

"I am very sorry," he said, "but it won't do, it isn't up to your usual level. I would make it do if I could, but—it isn't possible."

"I knew," she said, "it wouldn't."

He looked at her in surprise, for she was unfolding another roll of manuscript.

"If you will look at this," she said, "you won't say the same."

He took the paper and began to read casually; then he became interested. He read to the end without speaking. When he had finished he rang the bell and gave the manuscript to the young man who answered his summons.

"This can go to the printer at once," he said; "you have had the necessary directions already."

Eleanor half rose to her feet, and then sat down again. She did not utter a word.

"You have never done anything so good," said the editor; "it is an unpleasant subject, but you have treated it cleverly, very cleverly."

"I shall never do anything so good again," was her strange answer. "I knew you would take it. Would you mind paying me for it *now?* For I must go into the country to-morrow."

He gave her the cheque she asked for, and she took Lorna away next day.

A month after she saw Ralph Webster again. He had returned unexpectedly, and he sought her out at the farmhouse where she was living with her baby. But they did not meet as friends; she saw him with a shock of surprise, and he looked at her as she had never seen him look before.

"Mrs. Wakefield," he said, "I have no right to follow you here, but I came to ask you a single question." She wondered for a moment—but only a moment—what was coming.

Then she turned to him with a look full of sadness.

"I will answer any question you like to ask," she said.

He had a magazine in his fingers, and he opened it at a page that she well knew. Were not the title letters of it, the whole aspect of it, burnt into her brain? They were part of the crime that she felt she had committed.

"There is a story here," he said, "that occupies a very prominent place. It is called 'Hand in Hand to Death.' I think that you wrote it."

"Yes," said Eleanor, in a low voice; "I wrote it."

"There is no one in the world, except you and myself, that knows the whole of that story. I told it to you because I intended, the next time I saw you, to ask you to be my wife. I wanted you to have time to think of it first. You might not have liked me so well after knowing it."

She folded her child closer in her arms, and bent over it, that he might not see her face.

"I need not speak to you of such a subject now. I know how much you value my esteem—my confidence. You have *sold* my trouble to the world. I suppose you sold it?"

"Yes," said Eleanor, in a still, strange voice; "I was paid ten pounds for it." She was remembering that she changed the first sovereign to purchase her railway ticket, and that she had calculated how many weeks it would keep her in the country.

"I knew that a woman I loved might despise me," said Ralph; "but I could not guess that a woman I trusted would betray me—for money."

She did not answer him anything. There was that in his tone which made her not care to defend herself. She had injured him in a deadly and cruel manner. Let him say to her what he would. But he said no more; he lifted his hat and went.

A year after that found Ralph Webster a successful man. He had written a novel that hit the public taste; it was full of bitterness and scoffing, but the public liked such bitterness and scoffing, and bought the book.

He wondered sometimes what had become of Eleanor Wakefield. There was no trace of her at her old home, and the editor told him that she had sent him no more contributions.

She had seemed to Ralph a noble woman—a woman whom he might love on an equal footing, with all trust and reverence, without pity or forbearance. And she had failed him strangely and meanly, so that the sting of her offence had not yet left him entirely; but it troubled him a little to remember that she had made no defence. This had put him in the wrong, and made him wonder what her defence could be.

It was in the dusk of evening that he stepped into a railway carriage, which had only one occupant—a lady who, sitting just opposite to

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him, whose face was now turned from him, and it was only when he had been seated some minutes that something in her intense stillness attracted his attention.

She had desired him to forget her presence, or not to notice it, but the effort defeated itself, and his first half-curious, half-unconscious glance at her made him lean across to her.

"Mrs. Wakefield!" he said.

"Yes," she answered, "it is Mrs. Wakefield." Then she added quietly: "I should like, if I may, to congratulate you on your great success."

"You may spare me your congratulations. My success is built on my great unhappiness. None should know that better than you."

"Is it not so with many people?" she asked, gently, ignoring his last remark. "But some are unhappy without success."

He looked at her more attentively. She was in mourning, and she was much changed. The passive attitude of her hands on her lap told him this, as well as the tone of her voice.

"You never followed up *your* success," he remarked. "Mr. Blakely told me that he expected great things of you."

She answered him nothing.

"Mrs. Wakefield," he went on, vaguely hurt by her silence, which tormented him with an impression of his own cruelty, "I want to apologise to you for what I said when we last met. It was too much."

"It was not too much. I have said more to myself before and since. And yet," she said, turning her eyes full upon him, "I do not ask you to forgive me, because I do not repent. I would do it again, if the past came back to me. It is right that you should know how evil I am. I do not repent. I would do it again. Yet I hate myself for doing it. Besides," she added, in a lower tone, which she could hardly have meant him to hear, "it spoilt my happiness as well as yours."

"I do not understand," he said.

"Why should you understand?" she answered. "It does not matter."

The train was whirling on in the darkness. The noise of its rush, the flashing of lights in the city they were leaving, seemed to increase the solitude of these two, who were so near, yet so far apart; so much akin in spirit, and so hopelessly estranged.

"If it had been for Fame," he said, "I could have understood the temptation better. It would have been a higher sort of temptation. But you did not even sign the story, and you have not republished it."

"I hoped," she said, "that it would be little read and soon forgotten. You had gone away for a long time. I thought that you would never see it. And no one else could ever guess where I got it from."

"You made it very clever," he replied. "I wonder, having gone so far, that you go no farther."

"I shall never write again," she answered. "I have no motive. And what I did write has cost me too much."

He did not understand her; he had not known of her past poverty, nor of her recent loss. But he went on to say: "When I look at you it seems impossible to believe that you did such a thing without a reason. It may have seemed a little thing to you, but it was so much to me."

"I knew how much," she answered; "I knew all the meanness of what I did, the treachery of it, and that it would hurt you if you knew, but I thought that you would never know."

"And you did not love me," he added; but he was watching her keenly as he spoke.

Her eyes flashed upon him for a moment.

"Oh," she said, "it was *because* I loved you that I could not help doing it. If I could have escaped from the memory of what you told me, and have thought of other things instead, it would never have been written. If I could only have forgotten you!"

He was startled and astonished. He caught her hands and then let them go again.

"I wish I could believe you," he said.

"You need not. Why should you?" she answered. "I have nothing left to give you. What is a love worth that helped me to betray you?"

"And are you still *glad* you did it?" He had taken her hands firmly now, that he might look into her eyes. There was no tenderness there, only a desperate defiance.

"Am I glad of anything? Can I ever be glad of anything any more? It is only that I would do it again for the same reason. And yet I did not get the thing for which I paid such a heavy price."

"Will you tell me what the thing was?"

"It was only," she answered, "that I thought that treachery the price of my baby's life—and now my baby is dead."

She drew her hands away from his as she spoke. There had come into her eyes a grief that awed and restrained him. He could see that it had nothing to do with himself. Her tone was very quiet. It seemed to leave him at a great distance from her.

For a moment he felt that he had got his answer, and could speak of love to her no more in the presence of such a sorrow. Then his courage came back, and with it resolution. If he was sure enough of his own love for her he could not fail in the end to drive away both her sorrow and her remorse.

"I have been cruel to you," he said; "can you forgive me?"

"I?" she answered tremulously; "how can *I* forgive *you?*"

"Because I have been a fool, and quarrelled with my own happiness." And then he added, speaking slowly: "The story was a part of your own life. You had a right to do what you wished with it. At least, you can make it a part of your life if you will be more generous to me than I was to you."

She let him take her hands again. She looked into his eyes searchingly. What she saw there seemed to satisfy her, for she answered irrelevantly:

"Oh, I have been so lonely. To live in the world with nothing but myself and your contempt! You cannot guess what it was like."

"Will you live in the world with me and my love, and see if you like it better?"

She had been too long without happiness to fight against it now, and her answer ended his trouble and hers.

A. Armitt.

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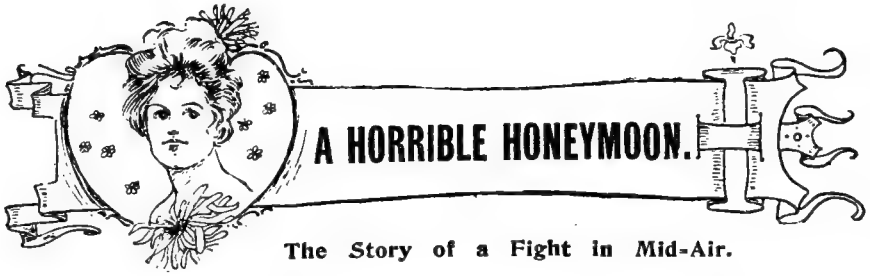

A HORRIBLE HONEYMOON.

The Story of a Fight in Mid-Air.

Hector Eric Gower, artist and journalist, strolled leisurely along the Brighton esplanade, and, with a cultivated eye for colouring, watched the deepening glowing glory of the setting sun and its kaleidoscopic tintings of the blue water below.

He was a handsome man, well set and well groomed, and, from the swift, intelligent flashes of the clear blue eyes, and the frank, impulsive nature which the whole face betokened, one might have set him down as a clever and a brilliant conversationalist.

But there was something about the poise of the head that did not harmonise with the rest of his bearing, and which, though inexplicable to the casual eye of a stranger, was understood by his more intimate acquaintances. And there was a good deal of excuse for it. In a word, the world had been very kind to Hector Gower.

He had distinguished himself as a war-correspondent in the recent Boer war, and Fortune had smiled on him. There are few men who can retain their humility when the world claps its hands. The adulation of the multitude and the undisguised envy of his fellows had added the leaven of conceit to his otherwise healthy character.

It was more than probable that time would eradicate this unwholesome habit of self-applause, and it was hoped so by those who knew him best, for he was one of the best fellows in the world, and no man more richly deserved the fame which had fallen to his lot.

But evolution is a terribly lengthy process, and Hector Gower might have gone on indefinitely in his self-pride but for one unlooked-for circumstance. Sorrow is a swifter factor than time, and pride, they tell us, goes before a fall!

Presently Hector Gower turned in his walk and retraced his steps to the hotel in which his bride of but three short, blissful days was awaiting him.

They were spending their honeymoon at Brighton, the resort of so many when they are on a similar happy errand.

That he and his pretty girl-wife were madly in love with each other, no one who knew them doubted. But, even in this divinest of all earthly joys, the leaven of self was not wholly absent. True, this had been stimulated and fostered by his young wife's passionate devotion and admiration, and therefore in this, as in all other views of the case, there was excuse for the man.

But he had grown to expect this adoration of the "one" just as he did the praise of the multitude, as his natural right, demanded by his genius and his recognised superiority over other men. And his wife was too much in love to deny it him.

So, in his vain-glory, he thought, as egotists are wont to think, that no one but himself occupied a place in her heart or provoked a single thought or remembrance. It is small wonder then that his awakening was as startling as it was wholesome. And it was to come very soon.

Arrived at the hotel, Hector Gower entered his suite of apartments and looked round for his wife. But she was not to be seen, and, after a moment's hesitation, he entered her dressing room.

Still she was not to be seen, and he was just turning away when his eye fell on a daintily-bound morocco writing-case which lay on a small table by the window. He went casually over and looked at it. It was open, and several sheets of note-paper lay on the table.

Unthinkingly, he lifted the sheet of blotting-paper by the side of the writing-case, and, to his astonishment, saw a letter lying underneath. It was in his wife's handwriting, and, picking it up, he began to read it. The action was not positively wrong, but it was not over nice, and it brought its own punishment. For this is what he read:

"Dear Jack.—*I received the letter you sent me yesterday by your servant. I cannot tell you how grieved I am that you should have followed me down here. You must know that it is impossible now. If my husband were to find out, he would kill you, and perhaps me too. You must write no more letters to me, now or hereafter. I am sorry to be forced to write thus decisively, but I have really no alternative.*

"*If you feel but one tithe of the love that you profess towards me, you will think first of my happiness and leave me in peace. I had hoped we might have continued friends, but you have made that impossible. I am deeply sorry for you but you must ask no more of me —now. Good-bye, dear Jack, and forgive me if in any way I have encouraged you in the pursuit of what is now doubly impossible.—Yours very regretfully,*

"Cora Gower."

Hector Gower sank into a chair with the letter still in his hand and tried to think. What did it mean? His wife—the wife whom above all other women he had loved and chosen to bear his name and share his fame—and she could write to another man—like this!

His face went very white and the hand that held the letter shook perceptibly. Was this the way she returned his love? The thought stung him to the quick, and his face hardened. And what did the letter convey?

He read it through a second time and groaned. Every sentence pierced him with a new and a horrible significance. Was his wife—guilty? The bare suggestion was agony, but the letter admitted of no other construction. And now the guilty admitted, not the virtue, but the expediency of innocence and acted accordingly.

There was a look of stern resolution in his face as he reached this point in his reasoning.

The door opened, and, looking up, Hector Gower saw his wife standing before him. One quick glance had shown her both the letter which was still clutched in her husband's hand and the terrible construction he had put upon it.

Mutely she stood there, awaiting what she well knew, by the expression of his face, was to follow.

She was very beautiful—a picture of perfect womanhood; but she possessed a spirit which already began to rebel at so swift and hasty a condemnation. So she stood still and waited. Then he rose to his feet, and, tossing the letter on the table, said with a sneer:

"This is interesting, but, if you will pardon the addition, scarcely praiseworthy. A better example of cold rebuke and warm affection I have never seen. The only pity is that it should have been written by a married woman to another than her husband. But that is, perhaps, a mere trifle."

He paused, regarding her sternly. The woman made no reply. She still stood tense and motionless, and, with set face met the terrible accusation made against her in silence.

"You do not even attempt to defend yourself," pursued the man. "And perhaps that is as well, since, in the light of this letter, defence would be fruitless. Well, madam, there is but one course for me to pursue. I will relinquish the love I thought I possessed an hour ago, in favour of my more fortunate rival—'dear Jack'—and will therefore bid you—'Good-bye!'"

With a low bow, in which there was more of mockery than politeness, he turned swiftly, and, putting on his hat, went out of the room without once turning back.

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Cora Gower stood still, rigid and dry-eyed, till he had gone. Once she tried to speak, but her voice seemed to have forsaken her.

Had she been moved by one passion only, the result might have been different. But bitter indignation was struggling with her love, and before the mastery was won her husband of three short days had gone. Then she sank into a chair, and, covering her face with her hands, burst into a passionate flood of tears.

* * * * *

It was a week later, and the Greens were thronged with eager sightseers. The entire Brighton population seemed to have turned out to witness a spectacle which, it was announced, was to take place that day.

Mr. John Terrett, the well-known aeronaut, was to make an ascent in a balloon of exceptional capacity, with a view, it was whispered, of crossing the Channel. There was a light breeze from the north-west, and, in the centre of the Greens, the great unwieldly giant of the air was slowly being filled with the gas necessary to its ascent.

The aeronaut was himself superintending the work, and a good trip was expected. Mr. John Terrett was a tall, lithe, sinewy man of thirty, with dark, half-Spanish face and flashing black eyes, in which there was more love of adventure than of humanity.

At last all was ready. A dozen men stood about the car, firmly gripping the ropes which held it fast. The sand bags were all in, and the necessary instruments for accomplishing the voyage secured in their place.

There was a momentary hush as John Terrett looked round in search of his aerial companion. A man was making his way through the crowd, and, passing the barriers, entered the inner ring and approached the aeronaut. The man was Hector Gower.

With a curt nod of greeting he followed the aeronaut into the car, and the latter gave a signal for the great straining monster to be cast loose. At that instant a woman's shrill cry rang out among the crowd, and Cora Gower, pale and agitated, rushed into the ring.

"Hector, Hector!" she cried in an agony of supplication. "Don't go! For Heaven's sake—for my sake—don't go with him! You don't know him—oh, you don't know him! He'll kill you! Oh, don't go!"

Hector Gower looked once at the appealing figure of his wife. In the impulse of his heart he almost leapt from the car and took his grief-stricken wife in his arms. Then he remembered, and turned away his head.

There was a cruel gleam in the aeronaut's dark eyes, while a sneer curled his lips as he looked at the woman. Once more he gave the signal to ascend, and, with a mighty bound, the great giant of the air shot upward, amid the cheers of the crowd and the straining of many ropes.

Cora Gower gave one look upward, and then sank unconscious to the ground. Hector saw her there as he leant over the side of the rising car and his heart began to condemn him. But it was too late now.

Presently Hector Gower turned his eyes from the things around him to the aeronaut who was seated at the opposite side of the car.

Somewhat to his surprise, he saw that the man's eyes were fixed upon him with an expression which was anything but comfortable. It might have been only his fancy, but, though he turned his eyes away, he was conscious that those other eyes were still regarding him.

For a few moments he avoided them, but, in the end, met the fixed stare of the man before him. He was not a coward, but there was something in the lack-lustre expression of those horrible eyes that was anything but reassuring. Still the man stared till Hector Gower, unable to endure it any longer, said coldly:

"You appear to be more interested in me than your knowledge of me would seem to warrant."

The man made no reply, but, looking out of the car, watched the now rapidly disappearing panorama of busy Brighton. They were too high up now to be distinguished by the inhabitants of earth, and a gleam of satisfaction came into the dark eyes as he turned them once more on his companion. Then, for the first time since their ascent, he spoke:

"Hector Gower," he said slowly, "you wonder why I scraped acquaintance with you when I found you, like a miserable fool, nursing your wounded vanity in the little inn where you had hidden yourself, like the veriest cur, from the wife you had deserted. I am acquainted, you see, with the position of affairs." And he smiled grimly into the face of his astonished listener.

One quick glance showed her that her husband had seen the contents of the letter he held.

"You may be aware of what has transpired," retorted Hector Gower, "but it is scarcely any concern of yours, I think."

"I have made it so," said the aeronaut impudently, "and that is enough for you. But, in case you still wonder how I obtained this information——"

"Pardon me," interrupted Hector, "the problem has no interest for me."

"I may as well explain," continued the man, utterly ignoring the interruption, "that your wife herself acquainted me with the facts of your separation, and that I—John Terrett—am the 'dear Jack' whom, in company with your wife, you so virtuously condemned.

"We are cousins—she and I, and were brought up together as children, which accounts for her use of my Christian name, though you, in your unreasonable vanity and self-conceit, put quite another construction on the circumstance. She only made one mistake, and that was in imagining I had followed her to Brighton.

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"This ascent was billed long before I knew you were coming here, but I had persecuted her so much before that she had cause for that supposition. There is, in this wide world, Hector Gower, no woman more pure and true than she who has honoured your name and dishonoured her own by becoming your wife."

An angry flush dyed Hector Gower's cheeks, but the man only laughed scornfully, and went on:

"But you were vainer than any miss of seventeen, and were filled with self-righteous anger when you discovered that one of the worms who crawled the earth beneath your masterful feet had won but a word from the wife whom you had so magnanimously raised to the dignity and glory which appertains to the name of Gower."

Had the speaker held a whip above his victim he could not have stung him more. Every word was a deep home-thrust to the self-accusing man, who now, for the first time, realised his true position. He had been wrong—almost criminal—and he would go back to his deserted wife and ask her forgiveness. But he could endure this man's taunts no longer.

"Look you!" he said, leaping to his feet till the car rocked and swayed in mid-air. "We have had enough of this. Get to earth as speedily as you can, and have done with matters which do not concern you."

Again the aeronaut laughed and said slowly:

"So I sought you out, my strutting peacock, and, pandering to your vanity, persuaded you to accompany me on this aerial voyage. And why?" He rose to his feet and drew from his pocket a glittering revolver. "Because, Hector Gower, I will not see the life of this priceless pearl of womanhood cast before swine to be trampled under foot. You shall go down into the deep sea, and none shall know how you went."

He lifted the revolver and took deliberate aim. There was a sharp report, and a bullet flew past the head of Hector Gower. The swaying of the car had saved him.

With a bound he crossed the car and grappled with his adversary. A wrench of the wrist, and the revolver dropped from the hand that held it and fell into the airy abyss below. But the man's hand was free again in an instant, and the struggle began in deadly earnest.

To and fro they reeled in the rocking, heaving car of the great balloon. Now in the centre, now leaning perilously over the edge, till it looked as though both men must be hurled into the horrible gulf below.

Once more they neared the edge of the car which was rocking violently, so that they could hardly maintain their foothold. Hector Gower gave a momentary glance downward, and to his astonishment, found that the great balloon was rapidly descending.

A faint humming sound high above his head told him that the gas-valve was open and the gas fast escaping from its silken prison. In the struggle, the rope attached to the valve had been entangled among the outer ropes of the car, and the huge balloon, fast losing its buoyancy, was speeding downward into the wide expanse of blue waters below them.

But he dared not relax his hold of the aeronaut. If death came, it should not be by him. So the struggle continued, fiercer than before, while each man's breath came in laboured gasps and the sweat stood on their foreheads.

At last, with a supreme effort, Hector Gower pinned the aeronaut to the floor of the swaying car, and, holding him there, looked about him.

They were within five hundred yards of the water, descending with marvellous rapidity, and death seemed inevitable. But, glancing out on the other side, he saw, to his unbounded relief, a Channel steamer not a hundred yards from the spot where they must soon strike the water.

It was evident that the captain of the steamer had seen their peril, for a boat was being rapidly lowered and manned by the crew. The next instant the car struck the surface of the water. There was a momentary rebound, and, in that moment, Hector Gower released his hold of his adversary and sprang into the sea.

A moment later the aeronaut had leapt to his feet and followed his example, so as to escape the death-trap which the collapse of the great balloon would speedily make for anyone who remained therein.

The two men were quickly rescued by the crew of the boat and went on board the Channel steamer which was on her way to England.

No one had witnessed the terrible fight in the car of the balloon, and its descent was attributed to accident. So Hector Gower held his peace, while the aeronaut slunk out of his way and went below. A few hours and they were in England.

Without a moment's delay Hector Gower took train for Brighton, where he hoped to find his wife. But inquiry at the hotel elicited the information that she had left two days after his desertion, and a great fear came into his heart.

Where to turn he knew not. Perhaps she had returned to her people. He went to the station and caught the night-train to London, determined to find out if this were so. But it was too late, on his arrival, to make inquiries that night, so he went to a hotel and tried in vain to obtain forgetfulness in sleep.

Early in the morning he went in the direction where his wife's people lived, and in doing so passed very near to the spot where the house he and his much-wronged wife had chosen for their future home stood.

As if drawn to the spot by some inexplicable law of attraction, he turned into the street in which it stood. To his surprise he saw clearly that it was tenanted. A maid stood at one of the windows, engaged in some part of her duties.

With a quick hope at his heart, he mounted the steps and rang the bell. He was admitted, and, no comment or surprise being evinced by the maid who opened the door, he passed in and went from room to room in search of his wife.

At last he reached her dressing-room, where she sat arranging the coils of golden hair upon her head. She saw his image in the glass before her and with a little glad cry, sprang up to meet him. Going up to her, he took her tenderly in his arms and kissed her.

"Cora," he said humbly, "I do not deserve one word of forgiveness from your lips. I have been a scoundrel, and have had my punishment. Nay, more, for I must always have my punishment with me, since I can never forget that you too, who did not deserve it, have shared the misery and bitterness of the past week. Dearest, is there forgiveness for me? I am humble now. There is no more pride or childish vanity in the heart of the man whom you honoured by becoming his wife."

Cora Gower placed a trembling little hand over her husband's lips.

"I do not like to see my husband humble himself, even to me," she said tenderly. "I have forgiven you long ago, dearest, and now that you have come back to me I can be happy."

He took her in his arms again and kissed her passionately.

"Why did you come here?" he asked presently. "I thought you would have returned to your people?"

Cora smiled into his face, and the light of love beamed in her eyes.

"Because," she said proudly, "I knew you would come back to me. Because I trusted you, my husband, and would not shame you by speaking ill of you even to my own mother."

"God bless you, darling," he whispered huskily. "Truly it is you women who teach us how to love!"

By-and-bye Hector told his wife of the terrible fight in mid-air which he had had with John Terrett, and a few days later came the sequel, in the news that the famous aeronaut, who had for some time past suffered from some mental disorder, had lost his reason and was confined in a private asylum.

"I am not surprised," said Hector, when he had read the account. "But, even in his madness, he spoke many truths and saw things more clearly than I in my boasted reason."

Thus ended the honeymoon of Hector Gower and his young wife, and, though they have never forgotten it, its effect on one of the two at least has been to imbue him with a deeper humility, a greater unselfishness, and a broader sympathy with those who are about him than ever he had in the first flush of his fame—a fame which so nearly spoilt a kindly nature and a noble heart.

Walter J. Mowbray.

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Letter Juggling Competition.

CASH DOWN. FIRST PRIZE, £25.	CASH DOWN. SECOND PRIZE, £10.	CASH DOWN. THIRD PRIZE, £5.

TWO BILLIARD TABLES *(measuring 4 ft. 10 inches by 2 ft. 8½ inches), together with cues, balls, marking board, and spirit level,*

And **TWENTY-FIVE GRAMOPHONES**, *each one fitted with a Concert Sound-Box, and accompanied by two records.*

WHAT YOU HAVE TO DO.

Below you will find twelve sets of letters, each of which contains the name of a Railway Station in the United Kingdom (not necessarily using all the letters). You must write (in ink), in the space left for that purpose, the longest name you can make by rearranging the letters.

The name containing the greatest number of letters will be the correct solution. If, however, more than one such name can be made out of one set of letters, each will be counted correct. Only one name must be written on each line.

All the names will be found in the Index to Railway Stations in the January (1903) edition of Bradshaw's Guide. Should you be unable to obtain a copy of this Guide, a reprint of the Index will be sent to you for three penny stamps on application to BRADSHAW'S GUIDE, 59 Fleet Street, London, E.C.; or ROOM EIGHT, "SHORT STORIES," 17 and 18 Henrietta Street, London, W.C.

The first prize of £25 will be given to the competitor who fills in the greatest number of railway stations under the conditions stated. The second prize of £10 will go to the person who fills in the next greatest number, and the other prizes will be awarded in order of merit.

When you have filled in all the names you can find, take out this page and keep it by you. Don't on any account send it to us until the closing date is announced in "SHORT STORIES." Four more lists will appear.

In the event of a tie a further set (or, if necessary, several further sets) of letters will be submitted to the tieing competitors until one wins the first prize outright.

EXAMPLE:
ABGHIIMMNR... Birmingham.

EIGHTH LIST.

85. AEGILMR .....
86. ADENORSTWY .....
87. ACEKOORT .....
88. ADEFILNRZ .....
89. AACEEHHONNS .....
90. ABENRTOY .....
91. ABEHMNOST .....
92. ABEEHIMNNOST .....
93. AEFHIINRW .....
94. ABEEMRSTY .....
95. ACDIKKLRY .....
96. AACDEHRRSTY .....

Name..... Address.....

.....

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RED POPPIES

Telling of How a Lover Proved that He Was No Coward.

A BOAT was idly rocking on the blue waters of the bay. Overhead the golden sun shone down with dazzling brilliancy, warming the waters to an almost tropical heat.

Not a sound was to be heard in the deep stillness which prevailed. Not a breath of wind ruffled the surface of the water. But for the boat and its two occupants one might have imagined the lonely, rock-girt bay to have been part of some far-off desert shore. Yet it was in sunny England, cut deep into the Devonshire coast.

Away over the great, rugged cliffs a little fishing village nestled peacefully in the valley beneath, through which a silvery stream made music as it sped by to the shining, sunlit bay.

A narrow, winding path ran along by the side of the stream, under the shadow of the great grey cliffs, which the fisher-folk used in order to reach the bay where their boats were anchored.

There was another path, leading from the village up the rugged cliffside to a height of some four hundred feet. But though this led to the very summit of the cliff, overlooking the bay, there was no means of descent on the other side, where the towering sentinel of the bay shot down perpendicularly into the blue water.

When the tide was low the foot of the cliff was fringed with great jagged rocks, black and threatening, like the fangs of some great sea-monster. But the tide was up now, and the deep blue waters of the bay hid them from view.

The boat drifted on to the very spot where the rocks lay, far beneath her keel, and the girl looked up at the beetling cliff above her head. She was not exactly beautiful, but there was an indescribable freshness and wondering innocence in the fair, open face that was irresistibly attractive. There was a soft dreaminess, too, in the large, violet eyes, as she lifted them from the book in her lap to the great grey cliff overhead.

"Well?" said her companion—a tall, dark, handsome man of thirty. "Is your hero dead, that you look so sweetly sad, or is your heroine dying, becomingly and gracefully, in his strong arms?"

The girl made no reply.

"But perhaps your sympathies are with the villain?" went on the man banteringly. "That is not an altogether unfeminine view of a novel. The cliff seems to hold some attraction for you. Has the poor wretch been thrown over by the hero? Put me out of this suspense, Pearl, for pity's sake!" And he assumed an expression of mock supplication.

The girl laughed and looked down at him.

"No," she said. "The hero is pledged to get his lady a spray of edelweiss. They are in Switzerland, you know, and he will have to run terrible risks in order to get it. But he will do it—I am sure he will! Ah, it's only a story! Real men are too prosaic to do such things. It is only we women who are silly enough to be romantic."

"Humph!" responded the man doubtfully. "And what immeasurable and eternal benefit is the getting of this edelweiss going to procure for your heroine?"

"Don't be silly, George!" said Pearl with a pout. "He is going to do it in order to prove his love."

"Is that necessary?" asked George.

"No, but—— Oh, you know, you silly boy! She wants to have a greater proof of it than she has now, and—and she wants to have something that will remind her of how brave and fearless he is!"

"Ah!" responded George, not yet seeing the expediency of the act. "So she has asked him to try to break his neck! Well, I hope he may do it! He has my very best wishes!"

The girl's eyes flashed, while a flush heightened the colour of her cheek.

"That is just what I said just now," she said scornfully. "Real men are too prosaic to do such things. I think, too, there is too much of the coward in them to risk the possibility of so much as a scratch for the sake of a lady's wish!"

"A lady's whim!" corrected the man.

"A lady's wish!" persisted Pearl, becoming a little—just a little—angry at her lover's criticism of the case. "Take yourself, for instance. Would you do it?"

"No," said George quietly. "At least, not without better reason than that you have described."

"Precisely," said Pearl, with a disdainful curl of her red lip. "But you are deceiving yourself. It is not a question of sufficient reason. It is the fact that a natural cowardice stands in your way. In a word, you dare not!"

There was a flash in the man's dark eyes as he heard the words.

"Be careful, Pearl!" he said in a suppressed tone. "Or you may yourself create the 'sufficient reason.' 'Dare not' is a term that no true Englishman can brook."

The girl laughed a silvery, rippling laugh. She had roused him at last. She was very thoughtless. He had sneered at her romance and she longed in some way to punish him for it. And now she had touched the right chord. She meant to make the most of it, and, in her thoughtlessness, forgot that her words could move the man more than the sweeping away of nations.

He loved her—she knew that—but he had no right to laugh at her romance, and she was going to punish him as he deserved.

Once again her eyes wandered up to the sides of the cliff, four hundred feet above their heads, and rested on a bunch of red poppies, growing in a little hollow of the cliff side, some two-

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thirds of the way up. With a mischievous light in her violet eyes, she pointed out the poppies to her companion.

"See!" she cried with a laugh. "There is the very thing! Poppies are as good as edelweiss. Now then, George Drake, you dare not get those poppies for me by to-morrow night! Now mind—it won't do to sneak off to some meadow or cornfield, and pick two or three there, for I shall come here to see if these are gone. You must get these or none, and, if I know you, George Drake, it will be none. Because, as I said just now, you dare not!"

She did not for one moment believe that he would attempt it. Otherwise she would have hesitated before taunting him so. But she liked teasing her handsome lover, and, when he made no reply, she laughed again, merrily and triumphantly, seeing not the flash of the dark eye and the steadfast, determined compressing of the firm lips. For George Drake had heard and accepted the challenge.

The morning had gone, the golden sun had passed its zenith, the boat lay high on the shining sand by the mouth of the stream, and the blue bay, sparkling with a thousand dancing lights, lay quietly sleeping through the golden hours of a summer afternoon.

It was about four o'clock when a figure appeared on the edge of the cliff, high above the blue waters, and stood for an instant gazing out to the great grey headlands beyond. In his hand he carried a long, stout coil of rope, a pointed bar of iron, and a huge hammer.

Slowly and deliberately he moved along the edge of the cliff, until he had reached a spot where the rocky wall, after jutting out into the bay, dropped back again, sheer and precipitous, forming a miniature inlet in the towering cliff.

Half a dozen yards from the edge, he began to drive the long bar deep into the solid earth, bringing down the great hammer with strong, swinging strokes. Soon it was set firm in the rocky soil, and, with an evident purpose in view, the man carefully bound one of the ends of the rope to the still projecting head of the iron bar.

Then he bound the other end securely about his muscular body, close under the armpits, and tested the long rope in twenty different ways. It was evident the man was practical, even in so perilous an undertaking, for his purpose was now apparent.

George Drake was not the man to neglect precautionary measures in a task like this. But the rope held firm, and, gripping it close to the iron bar, he turned his back on the sea and paid out the rope, hand over hand, while he stepped slowly and cautiously backwards to the edge of the cliff.

Close to the brink, he stopped, and, kneeling down, shuffled over the remaining foot of rock, and then slipped over the edge amid a cloud of dust and falling fragments of the cliff, and disappeared from view.

The rope strained, but held firm, and George Drake, feeling its strength, heaved a sigh of relief and went slowly and painfully down, hand over hand, till he had reached the end of the rope, and was able to release his aching hands. There he swung in mid-air with the rope tight about his body, a mere speck against the frowning, beetling cliff.

A moment to recover his breath, and then he began to look about him. Ah, there were the coveted poppies, growing in their little crevice, and tempting him, as Pearl had done, to pluck them! But they were far to the left.

Slowly he began to swing his body, keeping his hands against the cliff side to steady him, till he looked like a huge pendulum as he swayed from side to side.

At last he reached the little group of rocks which formed the crevice for the sheltered poppies, and, putting forth all his strength, he clutched a jagged projection, and held on with straining sinews and set teeth. With a supreme effort, he resisted the recoil, and then, putting out one hand, while he held firmly by the other, he plucked the precious poppies and swung back again to his former position.

For full ten minutes he remained motionless, recovering the strength he had lost in the perilous feat. Then, with a light of triumph in his dark eyes, he fastened his treasures to the collar of his coat, where no harm could reach them, and looked upward, preparatory to climbing the long stretch of swinging rope. But what he saw there made his dark, handsome face grow blanched and haggard as the fear of a terrible death stared him in the face.

The swinging of the rope, drawn tight by the weight of his body, had chafed the straining strands against the edge of the cliff, and George Drake saw, with horror, that the rope was now worn half through. Would it hold when, strained still further, he drew himself up, hand over hand?

The sweat stood upon his forehead as he thought of the hungry black rocks below, and he looked wildly round for some means of escape. But the great towering cliff frowned back at him and gave him no hope. But he must make the attempt.

Gripping the rope high above his head, he drew himself slowly up, while the rope strained and the strands above his head split still more under the added weight. Once

Putting his hand to the collar of his coat, he unfastened a wet spray of red poppies.

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more he tried, but the rope severed again, and left but one of the three strands supporting him in mid-air. The task was impossible.

Slowly and very cautiously, he let himself down to his former position, and once more looked about him. Beneath him were many projections, but none so large that it might be used as a ledge. And below them again, were those horrible black fangs in the sea, cruel and sharp, ready to rend him if he fell.

All at once, he felt the rope yielding above his head, and, with a quick catch in his throat, he stretched out his hands in a vain attempt to grip the pitiless wall of the frowning cliff. Then the rope broke with a snap, and he fell.

Oh, the horror of that fearful drop! The blood rushed to his throbbing temples, a thousand sparks danced before his eyes, a blinding dust choked him as he sped down over the crumbling rock, and, with fingers torn and lacerated, he dropped into the abyss that yawned at his feet. And then, with a shock that well-nigh shook the breath from his aching frame, he struck a projecting rock and stopped.

It strained beneath his weight, and innumerable little cascades of dust broke loose from its black sides and slipped down the face of the cliff.

The *débris* which he had displaced on his descent went rattling downward about his ears, but he remained hanging upon a morsel of rock, which might, at any moment, be torn from the grey wall of the towering cliff and send him hurtling down to his death.

But the rock resisted his weight, and held fast to the cliff side. How long could he remain thus? He was lying across the rock, his arms on one side, his feet on the other, and he dared not move more than an inch or two.

Once more he looked about him. He had not fallen more than forty or fifty feet, and, even now, he was not quite half-way down the straight, beetling cliff.

He looked below—still those hungry rocks, for the tide was out now, and little pools lay between the sharp, black fringe of rocks. The sun, too, was sinking down in the west, and the thought of the night that was to come struck him with an untold horror.

What was his fate to be? His only prayer—the only one he could reasonably pray—was that his death might be a speedy one. And so night fell, and the stars shone in the purple sky, while the proud moon swept like a queen across the studded heavens, and, in her turn, went down too, to give place and sway to the orb of day.

The tide had risen in the night, but, when the dawn broke, it was ebbing fast, and presently the sharp black needles of rock pierced the blue waters of the bay and renewed their menace to the helpless, terrified victim above.

How he lived through that night, George Drake never knew. But when the morning dawned, calm, serene, peaceful, he lifted his haggard eyes to the pitiless sky and wondered how long the end would be.

There was no hope from the bay, for the projections which formed the miniature inlet in the cliff side effectually shut him off from the view of fishing boats. From the headlands of the bay to the mouth of the stream, where the boats were anchored, was a straight course, and he was quite out of the line of vision. It was only a tiny rowing-boat, whose occupants were bent on pleasure, that came his way, and the little fishing village was too unimportant to make this a frequent occurrence.

And above him? Well, there might be a bare hope there. Someone might climb to the top of the cliff and discover the severed rope. But, even then, what could they do? And then an idea suddenly flashed into his mind, and his dark, haggard eyes kindled with a new hope.

The rope! There it hung, sheer down the face of the cliff more than a hundred feet below him! It had been severed at the very top, while he hung helpless at the bottom. And, when he had been stopped by the projecting rock, the long rope had swept by him into the abyss below, till reaching its full length, the loop about his own body had stopped it and held it fast.

If he could get to the bottom of that rope, not more than a hundred feet would lie between him and the black rocks below. Even that would suffice to crush out his life, if he should fall back on to those horrible fangs. But the tide would turn again, and be high above the rocks before the golden sun had reached its zenith.

He could not go upward. To stay where he was meant a slow, torturing death. And, downward, there might be a chance.

With trembling fingers and throbbing heart, he hauled up the long rope, till he had the end in his hand. Then, cautiously and breathlessly, he swung it to and fro under the projecting rock, till it curled upward on the other side and dropped limply on to his back.

Trembling with excitement and hope, he made a running noose in the rope, drawing it tight about the projecting rock, thus using the rock as he had done the iron bar on the previous day. And then he waited—waited long hours of suspense and dread, till the tide should be at the flow.

As he lay there, he narrowly scanned the rocks below him, searching for a deep hollow, where he might strike the water with tolerable safety. Then, as the tide rose, he grasped the rope in his torn hands and slid off the rock into the abyss below.

Once again the rope stood his weight, and in a few minutes he had reached its limit and looked downward at the rapidly rising waters of the bay. Presently he took from his pocket a large clasp-knife, and again looked at the rising tide.

The minutes went by with painful slowness. One by one they wore out their allotted time, till the tide was at its height.

There was a swift, determined stroke of the knife across the strands of the rope, a snap as it severed above his head, and George Drake went hurtling down into the blue water beneath him. Would he strike a rock? Some of them were not many feet beneath the water. There was a plunge, and the water, churned into foam, bubbled up and over him, as he went down to the rocks below.

He had calculated well. Right between them he went, striking the hard sand as he touched the bottom. Then, with a desperate effort, he struck out for the surface and looked about him.

How fervently grateful he was now for the skill he possessed in all athletic exercises! But he was terribly exhausted, and it took all his remaining strength to reach the mouth of the little stream, where the frowning cliffs ceased and the golden sand sloped gently down to the edge of the bay.

And what was happening on the cliff above?

Pouting at her lover's absence and supposed neglect, Pearl Seymour put on her hat, and, leaving the village behind her, began leisurely to climb the steep, precipitous path up the side of the cliff.

Reaching the top, she crossed over to the other side, overlooking the bay. A rope lay at her feet, and surprised, yet without thinking, she stooped and touched it. The end of the rope came over the edge of the cliff, and, to her horror,

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she saw it had been severed by the rock against which it had been drawn.

Instantly, her words of yesterday flashed into her mind. The poppies! Surely George could not have taken the taunt seriously. And yet her own heart told her that it was not wholly in jest that her words had been uttered. She had been angry too. But was it possible?

Something glistened on the ground at her feet, and, stooping, she picked it up. It was George Drake's ring! With an agonised cry, she sped back down the steep path of the cliff, and up along the stream, till she had reached the bay.

As she did so, the figure of a man emerged from the water and stood before her. He was terribly cut and bruised, and his face was white and haggard. With a little stifled sob, she rushed up to him, and, flinging both her arms about his neck, cried to him to forgive her.

For a moment the man never spoke, but putting his hand to the collar of his coat, he unfastened a wet spray of red poppies, torn almost to fragments, and held them out to the sobbing girl.

"Don't!" she said, as she pushed them away. "Oh, how could you? How could I have been so wicked, so cruel, so heartless? Oh, my love, my love, can you ever forgive me?"

The man took her in his arms.

"Yes, dear," he said gently. "But you must never say to me again: 'You dare not!' I have been very near death, dear, and have lain all through the long night across a narrow rock on the face of the cliff, with no help, no hope of rescue. But—I have got your poppies!" And again he held them out to her.

She took them and kissed them almost reverently.

"Yes," she said, with deep humility, "I will keep them. Not as a test of your love, nor as a proof of your courage, but as a living reminder that the words of a foolish woman may lead a brave man to his death. And when I grow vain and apt to think over-much of my unworthy self, the sight of these poppies, withered and torn, will awaken the memory of this thoughtless folly of which I am now so bitterly ashamed, and teach me the lesson of all others which I need—the lesson of humility and wisdom."

George Drake drew her into his arms and kissed her.

"It was worth the risk, and the long, long hours of suffering," he said, "only to hear you speak thus nobly. I want you to be a true woman, dear, thoughtful, tender, kind, in whose heart the petty things of life shall find no place. The world is a school, wherein we learn many things, and I, as well as you, have learnt something to-day, which I shall never forget."

And they went back, hand in hand, to the little village in the valley.

M. J. Walters.

PATERFAMILIAS: "Clara, I see that the front gate is down this morning." Clara: "Yes, papa; you know love levels all things."

MISS ANTIQUE: "Are you quick to take a hint?" Young Harum-scarum: "Yes, very." "What would you do if I should turn down the gas?" "Call for help."

SHE: "Surely, my dear, you will consider the matter carefully before consenting to Clara's marriage with old Mr. Cashman?" He: "Certainly. I shall have his books examined by an expert."

CALLER: "You call this garden scene 'June,' but the leaves are all on the ground instead of on the trees." D'Auber: "They were on the trees, but the picture got such a withering criticism from the committee that they curled up and fell off."

SEASIDE VISITOR (at crowded hotel in Margate): "How much do I owe you? How much is my bill?" Clerk: "Let me see, your room——" Seaside Visitor: "But I didn't have any room. I slept on the billiard-table." Clerk: "Ah, well, then, eighteenpence an hour."

YOUR EDITOR CHATS.

THE eighth list of letters in the competition will be found on page 111. Four more lists will appear.

THERE is a gold-plated pencil-case waiting for the person who most nearly places the stories in this number in the order of merit in which they are regarded by the majority of readers. On the back of a postcard write the names of the stories in the order in which you prefer them and then send your postcard to PREFERENCE No. 3, SHORT STORIES, Pearson's Buildings, Henrietta Street, London, W.C., to arrive not later than by first post on Tuesday, July 28th.

IN response to my inquiry as to what readers did with their copies of SHORT STORIES after they have finished with them, I have had shoals of letters; the following are extracts from a few of them:

"I invest every week in six copies. Five of them I send to friends in the country with the request to pass them on to another friend when read. The sixth copy I read myself and then put it aside with a collection of literature to send to a hospital or workhouse."

"I think SHORT STORIES the most delightful and cheapest little paper ever published at the price. It is interesting the whole way through. After reading my copies I put them away until I get about a dozen or so, and then send them to friends. I call it my little book of sunshine, because when tired I can often sit and read just one story and enjoy myself for a few minutes."

"I am pleased to say that when I have read my copy I give it to my husband, who, after reading it, sends it along with a copy of THE BIG BUDGET, and sometimes PEARSON'S WEEKLY, to a friend of ours who is a sergeant in the 2nd South Staffs Regiment, stationed at Agra, India."

All the other readers from whom I have heard say that they send their copies of SHORT STORIES on to friends or to a hospital, or some such similar institution. This latter is, I am sure, a very excellent means of disposing of them. The patients like something both light to read and light to hold, and SHORT STORIES meets those requirements admirably.

IN two weeks' time a new serial by Mr. Henry T. Johnson will be starting. It is rather a different style of story from the present one. "THE BOND BETWEEN," but it will be none the less interesting for all that. The number of SHORT STORIES containing the first instalment will be dated August 8th. Readers should give their orders now for a copy to be reserved for them. Mr. Johnson's work is well known to readers of the *Daily Express* and THE BIG BUDGET.

I HOPE to be able to announce the result of the "Buried Stations" Competition shortly. The amount of work entailed in checking the attempts necessitates the delay.

THE summer is pursuing its course and the autumn days are drawing nearer, but still there is plenty of time for many more FRESH AIR FUND excursions to take place. Contributions have been coming to hand very satisfactorily so far, but it will not do for there to be any falling off, otherwise so many little mites will have to forego their one hoped-for day in the country.

You are not asked to give great sums—ninepence from each person who reads this will be a great help—if you can afford to send more, so much the better. Instead of waiting to see whether at the end of the summer you will be able to afford more than you have saved at present, send what you can now, remembering that "he gives twice, who gives quickly." All contributions should be addressed to the Hon. Sec., FRESH AIR FUND, Pearson's Buildings, Henrietta Street, London, W.C., and they will be acknowledged in *Pearson's Weekly*. Collecting cards can be had on application. **Your Editor.**

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In the Whispering Gallery.

A PRETTY LITTLE LOVE STORY.

"Now, really, Howard, this thing must stop, it's getting on my nerves," Muriel exclaimed as they walked home together through the long twilight of a Spring day from Mrs. Mortimer's "At home."

Howard looked penitent but persistent.

"You know how you can stop it, Muriel," he suggested.

"There you go again"—vexedly—"and I protest I will not stand it! A woman does not have to accept a man more than once, and I do not see why I am called upon to refuse you times out of number."

"Neither do I. Accept me and get it done with."

"Don't be ridiculous, Howard! If I ever had any notion of doing so you have put a quietus on it, for I *could* not marry a man of only one idea. For the past month 'Will you marry me, Muriel?' has been the only connected remark you have been capable of, and when you've been too far away from me to say it you have looked it. It has become monotonous and you interfere seriously with my plans."

He smiled down at her indulgently, maddeningly, as one might smile at a spoilt child.

"If I did not know you so well I should lose faith in you," he told her. "'Your plans' are all very well for you to tease me with and toy with, but my Muriel—the Muriel I have known all my life—would never carry them out."

She laughed defiantly, if rather mirthlessly.

"And why not?" she asked. "Even before there was any ground for planning, I told you that if I ever married—which is a matter of much doubt—it would be for the sake of making a startlingly brilliant match. The chance for that has come to me, and I am not going to have it spoilt by any absurd young man who, after having confided his love affairs to me from the time he was old enough to have any, suddenly takes it into his head to fancy that he has fallen in love with his *confidante*."

"Perhaps it's the fact that I did not have sense enough to do it in the first place that you cannot forgive?"

"Forgive! There's no question of forgiveness; except the fact that you hung around me this afternoon like a thunder-cloud, thereby keeping the Duke——"

"Where it's best that he should be."

"You are incorrigible, and I tell you this must stop. I've got to have a clear field just now and a steady head. You must leave me alone for—well, we'll say for a month."

"Do I interfere with the steadiness of your head?"—innocently.

"Why, yes—no—of course you do. It's—it's disturbing to any woman to be proposed to indiscriminately, and when the same man does it it waxes boresome. It's grown to be so much force of habit with you that you do it now unhesitatingly and without any sign of embarrassment—quite unromantically."

"Thought you did not believe in romance?" he reminded her.

"Well, I don't, but I do believe in—plans. That is why I insist that you leave me in peaceful pursuit of mine. At the end of a month you may come to see how they have prospered; and incidentally tell me what new fields you have conquered."

"Muriel, do you mean——"

"That at dinners, at balls, at teas, or any place where there is the remotest chance of your proposing to me you shall studiously avoid me. Not only this, but if chance throws us together you will act as though I were only a casual acquaintance."

"But people will talk," he objected.

"Not any more than they do now; and, anyway, I think I shall give them something new to talk about."

"You'll be sorry if you marry the Duke, dear," he said, as they stood on her doorstep.

"Why, may I ask?" she flashed at him.

"Because," he said deliberately, taking her hand, "because you love me."

For just a moment she seemed to waver, then she wrenched her hand free.

"Oh, the conceit of man!" she mocked. "Well, this month will show whether you or I know my mind best."

"You shall have the month, if that's what you want," he agreed unruffled—a bit too unruffled was Muriel's thought—"but don't play too hard with the fire. I don't want to see my little girl get scorched. When the month is up," he continued more gravely, "I will come and give you just one more chance to refuse me. If you avail yourself of it that will be the end. I love you very dearly, but I do not intend to let your perversity spoil my life."

Howard, the long-suffering and forbearing, had rebelled! This was an issue upon which Muriel had not reckoned. Still more to her surprise he made no apparent effort to circumvent her decision, so that she now saw him not at all save at a distance. She tried to fancy that he looked haggard and dejected, but was obliged to confess to herself that he appeared instead most aggressively healthy and contented.

"So much for the constancy of man!" Muriel mused. "Who would think to see him that he was a repeatedly rejected lover?"

Meanwhile her plans, like many unwise ones, were working out beautifully. The Duke pressed his suit assiduously, and she knew that the day was not far off when she must give him his answer. What was it to be?

In this perplexed frame of mind she drove down into the City one day with a friend who wished to make some research in the library at St. Paul's. As they ascended the steps of the cathedral Howard chanced to pass that way, and when his delighted eyes fell on Muriel the temptation to follow her was greater than he could resist. In the gloom of the vast interior he could watch her unobserved, and he fancied that she would seem in some way nearer to him there than when she was surrounded by glitter and glare and other men, as she had been always when he had seen her during these few, interminable weeks.

Muriel and her friend paid the fee and ascended the shallow-stepped winding stairway that leads up to the library and goes on far above it. At the entrance to the library Muriel paused a moment for breath.

"Do you know I have never been to the whispering gallery," she said. "While you get what you want I believe I will go on up."

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"Yes, do—it's quite wonderful," the other girl replied; and Muriel began to climb again, unconscious that a man came softly after her, not far behind, but effectually hidden by the ever-recurring turns of the broad, spiral way.

Muriel, when she reached the whispering gallery, chatted a moment with the old custodian who dispenses information to the public, then walked to the opposite side of the gallery so that she might test the marvellous acoustic properties of the place. She placed her ear close to the wall in readiness.

"Do you hear, miss?" came a queer, muffled voice.

"Yes," replied Muriel hesitatingly; she had expected to hear more distinctly. Nor was she disappointed.

"Haven't you missed me at all, Muriel?" was the startling question which followed, very clear and in a voice that she knew well.

"Why, Howard!" she exclaimed, entirely taken by surprise.

"You didn't say anything about churches," Howard went on, "and I haven't proposed to you any way. Have you missed me, dear?"

"I believe I have," Muriel admitted.

"Then do come round and tell me about it," he begged; and Muriel went. The sympathetic custodian discreetly turned his back at her approach.

Muriel dimpled and blushed hesitatingly as she gave Howard her hand.

"How's the Duke?" he asked interestedly.

"Quite well, I believe," she replied indifferently. "I'm to give him an answer to-morrow," she went on without looking at him.

"And you'll say 'no'?" he asked breathlessly.

"Not—not unless I've said 'yes,' to someone else first."

Howard's heart beat so that he felt that she must hear it, but he managed to speak calmly.

"The month is not up yet," he said, "and it's to be the last time of asking. What would you say to me, I wonder, Muriel?"

"Oh, Howard!" she cried, as he led her round a sheltering turn in the stairway; "don't be so judicial."

"What then?" he asked, less steadily. She was tantalisingly close to him now. She laid her little gloved hand on his arm with the sweetest timidity imaginable.

"My old Howard of the one idea," she answered softly, and was gathered without further ado into a close embrace.

"This has been the very longest month I've ever lived," he said.

"I should think it had. I thought you'd never give in."

"But you said a month, sweetheart."

"I've said lots of things I didn't mean," she twinkled.

"The Duke?"

"Of course the Duke. As though I could have! But you took such an awfully long time to fall in love with me that I wanted to be quite, quite sure of you."

"You haven't said 'yes' to me yet," he reminded her after he had tried to prove to her the certainty of his devotion.

"'You haven't asked me, sir, she said,'" she laughed happily. "And, Howard, that girl downstairs will think I've tumbled over the rail."

"Then we will go and tell her that you were merely stopped by the male—the very happiest male in the whole world, darling!"

Winifred Alan.

NEARLY A TRAGEDY.

Telling of How a Wife Realised the Value of Her Husband.

"Cora, dear, will you have me? I've run away!"

Cora Dainsford started up from her cosy corner, her eyes dilating with genuine astonishment.

"My dear Mrs. Denman, this *is* an unexpected pleasure."

The rich tones rang a trifle insincere, and the dark eyes glinted unpleasantly; but the pretty, irresponsible being, who called herself Wilfrid Denman's wife, noticed neither.

"I'm so glad you're glad," she said, effusively kissing the olive cheek of the woman who, not so long ago, had been her rival; thereafter subsiding into a chair and pulling the dainty gloves from her white, be-jewelled hands.

"Of course I'm pleased to see you, Winnie," responded Cora. "Why shouldn't I be? The past, so far as I'm concerned, is dead and buried long ago. But"—suddenly—"why haven't you brought the husband?"

Winnie looked up mischievously.

"Didn't I tell you I'd run away. Will doesn't know where I am."

"You odd child! What *do* you mean?"

Cora Dainsford drew up a chair, and sat down opposite the little woman, with clasped hands and inquiring eyes. She had never really forgiven this dainty beauty for supplanting her in the affections of handsome Wilfrid Denman. On the contrary, the thorn had rankled badly, and still—although many months had passed, and she herself was now the wife of another man, still it remained in the wound.

"You haven't quarrelled surely, you two?" she queried, fixing her black eyes on the other's face with an intentness that was almost embarrassing.

"No," said Winnie, "that is, not to say quarrelled exactly. But Will is so different somehow. When we were first married nothing was too good for me, and now—well, I'll just give you an instance.

"Yesterday we went out to Madame Rénaud's, and I wore a lovely gown—white lace over pink. It's a perfect dream, and suits me to perfection; but when Will saw it, instead of going into raptures as he used to do, he actually frowned."

There was more than a suspicion of tears in the big, baby-blue eyes.

"'Don't you like it, dearie?' I asked him. 'It is very pretty,' he said, quite slowly; 'but, Winnie, you had that blue one only last week, and, honestly, I can't afford it.'

"Men are always saying things like that, aren't they? But really I never thought Will would turn out like that. He's so glum and preoccupied too. I can't imagine what's come over him."

Winnie threw out her sweet lips in a pout that most men would have voted adorable. She was so fair and pretty that she had been rather extensively idolised by her parents, and her big, hulking brothers, so her little imperious airs might readily be forgiven her.

Cora thought of this, and wondered if it were possible that Wilfrid Denman had some trouble, which he dared not reveal to this gay, child-like little wife of his; and there and then she determined to question her own husband on the subject; confident that if anything were amiss with the firm of

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Denman, Roper, and Co." he would not be without some knowledge of it.

"He neglects me, too," went on the petulant voice. "Would you believe it, Cora, we haven't been to the theatre for weeks—the opera season, too. It's positively scandalous! And, to crown all, he actually rushed off to business this morning without kissing me! What do you say to that? Don't you think I'm justified in teaching him a lesson?"

Now the path of Cora Dainsford's duty lay straight and plain before her, but she chose to ignore it. The opportunity for creating a rupture between those two hearts recommended itself to her as too good a one to be let slip. The old thorn rankled anew, and the vindictive element in her nature re-asserted itself.

"Yes," she said, "I think you are quite right, dear. Wilfrid oughtn't to treat you so, and a little reminder will do him good. You are at liberty to stay here as long as ever you please, dear."

"You darling!" exclaimed Winnie, jumping up, and flinging her arms round the other's neck. "I knew you would sympathise with me. But, oh!"—drawing back suddenly—"what a lovely gown!"

Cora smiled.

"I'm glad you like it," she said. "I donned it a moment ago in honour of a visitor."

"A visitor?" Winnie looked her inquiry.

"Yes. None other than Captain Marshall, your old admirer. He's dining with us to-night. Isn't it a coincidence?"

"Mercy!" cried Winnie. "It's more than that. Why, do you know, I've actually brought that hapless pink dress with me; so at any rate I shan't disgrace you at dinner. What splendid luck!" And, laughing together, the two women made for the upper regions.

* * * * * *

The dinner that night proved an eminently successful function. There were several other guests besides Captain Marshall, friends of Hubert Dainsford, so Winnie gathered from a formal introduction; but the Captain from the first had devoted himself exclusively to her.

He was excellent company, this notorious flirt and flatterer, and although Winnie knew him as such, a pleasurable thrill went through her in response to his honeyed words. It was pure mischief and coquetry too, which led her to acquiesce when the Captain proposed a visit to the conservatory.

Silently, her bare shoulder brushing the sleeve of his coat at intervals, they strolled down the miniature avenue of ferns and palms, to where the fountain hissed and sparkled in the moonlight. Arriving there, they stopped, leant together on the edge of the marble basin, and smiled into each other's eyes.

The Captain was giving little, nervous tugs at his long moustache, a sure sign that he was stirred. He was one of those men who do momentous things on the spur of the moment, without forethought and with a fine disregard of possible consequences.

Similar circumstances had sufficed to draw avowals of love from his lips on more occasions than he cared to remember; nor was he proof against them now.

In a moment he had forgotten Wilfrid Denman, forgotten prudence, and was pouring passionate words in the ear of the woman at his side.

"Winnie, my darling, I can keep silence no longer. I love you; and when I see you as you are now I realise that I can never love anyone else but you!"

His arm was about her, his bold, black eyes were close to her face, and realising then her danger, she sprang away from him, with an exclamation of fear and repulsion.

"Captain Marshall, this is an outrage! How dare you speak such words to Wilfrid Denman's wife! Leave me—instantly. Go, I say!" And she stamped her tiny foot passionately upon the tiled pavement.

* * * * *

Left alone, for the Captain had slipped away with his head down like a beaten dog, the little lady smiled bitterly to herself. Such then were the fruits of her foolish escapade.

Poor Wilfrid! She had treated him vilely. She had been selfish and foolish—a most unwifely wife. But she would go back to him at once. She would implore his forgiveness, he would give it with many kisses, and they would be infinitely happier than before.

Full of this new resolution she gathered up her skirts and hurried off in search of her hostess; but at the foot of the main staircase she came to a sudden stop as the sound of voices from an adjacent room were wafted out to her.

"They say the firm can't stand the strain any longer. Roper must have been mad. And as for Denman, he can't see an inch in front of his nose except where it concerns that extravagant little wife of his!"

Winnie, gripping convulsively at the hand-rail to support herself, recognised the voice as belonging to Cora's husband, next moment Cora herself was speaking. There seemed to be a note of triumph in her voice.

"And does it mean complete ruin for them, then?"

"I fear so. Denman's wife's extravagance will have been the last straw. That woman has simply no idea of the value of money."

"I know; but really I can't say I'm sorry. In fact, I'm rather glad. I hate the pair of them!"

"Tut, tut!" came again in the deep tones of the man. "What a little spitfire you are, Cora!"

Sick and faint, Winnie waited to hear no more, but flew up the staircase, and ten minutes later was out of the house and speeding homewards in a cab.

She thought the man eyed her pityingly as she stepped into the full glare of the electric light in the hall, and a cold shiver ran down her spine.

"Where is your master, James?" came at length, faintly, through her quivering lips.

"In his study, ma'am."

Winnie tore off her wrap, and stole softly up to the door. There was no sound within, so she pushed it noiselessly open and entered.

Next moment a wild cry burst from her as she flung herself headlong upon the man who sat there, grey-faced, with her photograph propped up on the desk before him, and the shining barrel of a revolver pressed against his temple.

Winnie broke out into a cry.

"Oh, Will, Will!"

The weapon went crashing into the empty fireplace, two soft arms stole round his neck, and gradually the despair on the man's face melted away, as he gazed into the blue eyes, dark now with anguish, of his truant wife.

"Oh, my dear!" she cried, brokenly, "another minute and—— Oh, Will, it would have killed me. I've been a horrid, thoughtless, selfish little wretch, dear; but, oh, my husband, I have learnt a lesson now! I'm going to be so good in future—indeed, indeed I am!"

"In future!" A spasm of pain crossed Wilfrid Denman's face. "My darling wife, you don't know, and how can I tell you. An awful thing——!"

She stopped him with a kiss.

"I know," she said softly. "I know all. I heard it only half an hour ago, and that was why I came back. Why didn't you tell me before?"

He crushed her to him then, and kissed her all over face and hair.

"But, dearest," he said at last. "Have you thought? Do you quite realise it? Perhaps in time, with luck and the help of friends, I may be able to retrieve poor Roper's errors. But it will mean years of pinching and economising, and I dread it for your sake, darling."

With an impulsive movement she nestled closer to him; love and hope shining together in her brilliant eyes.

"Dearest," she murmured, "it will come hard at first, I know, but sooner than lose you, my husband, I would endure anything—even the poverty of rags and wretchedness. I love you so."

B. A. Lerish.

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Splendid Serial Story.

THE BOND BETWEEN.

A Romance of Real Life. By BLANCHE EARDLEY.

NAMES TO REMEMBER.

SIR TREVOR MAITLAND, of Maitland Manor, Melton.
LADY MAITLAND, Sir Trevor's second wife. Before her marriage with him she passed as a widow named Mrs. Vernon.
JACK MAITLAND, Sir Trevor's son by his first wife.
AGNES MAITLAND } Jack's sisters.
MURIEL MAITLAND }
WOOLF MAITLAND, the present Lady Maitland's only child.
IVY STRANGE, a foundling with whom Jack is in love.
HERIOT NORTH, a friend of Sir Trevor.
MIKE HOLLAND, an ex-convict and burglar who blackmails Lady Maitland, he having been in prison with her first husband.
MARY MASON, Lady Maitland's maid.
DIGBY SCARLETT, an explorer and acquaintance of Jack. It was through him that Lady Maitland's first husband was imprisoned.
GILBERT CHASE, a detective employed by Jack to discover the mystery of Ivy's birth.
VERNON GRANT, Lady Maitland's first husband.

TWENTY-EIGHTH CHAPTER.

The Man of the Hour.

January was nearly over, and a chastened, humid February with shy suggestions of latent Spring in the air, loomed near. The trees in the parks waved their stately branches, and whispered among themselves the coming fashions in green, rejoicing that the cold wind would shortly cease to whistle through their vivid garments, as it had through their bare, brown branches.

Under one of the larger trees in Hyde Park a girl was sitting, watching with dreamy eyes the ebb and flow of life as it passed before her.

Beyond the park gates the murmur of the traffic fell upon her ears; and the distant calling of the birds as they flew from tree to tree, reminded her of the country woods and fields she had so recently left.

Presently she rose with a shiver; it was chilly, and her thin coat was but a poor protection against the bleak winds. As she strolled towards the exit that led to Hyde Park Corner, a beggar stopped her—one of the usual specimens that drift from pillar to post, living on the charity of chance pedestrians, when not shadowed by that blue-coated bugbear, the police.

"Please, kind lidy, a copper!" the woman whined. "I'm just out of the 'orspital, and am walking to see my sister wot's in the country."

The girl stopped; her gentle heart stirred by the woman's miserable condition. Rags, dirt, and decay were all written in her low-bred face; and, unnoticed by the girl, were the evident signs of drink in the sodden eyes and bloated skin.

"I am afraid I have not much to give you," she said in a kindly tone; "but I will give you sixpence. Have you far to go?"

The woman nodded, and cast a hasty glance round in search of her mortal enemy, "the copper." He was not in sight, however, so she pocketed the sixpence, and said:

"Yes, lidy; I'm going to Melton in Leicestershire."

"Melton!" the girl gasped, with blanched cheeks and startled eyes. "Did you say *Melton?*"

"Yes, lidy," the woman whined, wondering at the interest so suddenly evinced by the lovely young girl with the "angel face" and sad eyes. "I'm goin' back to visit the grave of my pore 'usbin', 'e was murdered in the wood, and I'm a widder without a penny!"

For a moment it seemed that the girl before her would faint, she swayed and trembled like a leaf, while her eyes looked staring and wild.

"Your husband!" she whispered; "how—how awful! What—what—was his name? I—I—once knew—Melton."

"Mike 'Olland, miss," the woman said dolefully, glad to have created an interest in a "lidy" who might be provailed upon to dispense her charity more liberally under the influence of pity. "Me and 'im was as 'appy as could be till we lost our little girl, and then——"

She stopped abruptly, startled by the frozen look of horror on the white face of the girl, who threw out one trembling hand to steady her tottering steps.

"Don't—don't say any more!" she gasped. "See! I will give you nearly all I have; I must keep a few shillings, but you may have the rest. It is only half a sovereign," she said, with a pitiful smile, as she pushed the money into the astounded woman's hand; "but—but take it, for the sake of your—your little girl!"

Without waiting for the ragged specimen of humanity to speak she turned and hurried away with swift, eager steps, almost as though she expected the woman to follow her.

"Well, I'm blowed!" ejaculated the outcast, in a puzzled tone; "who would 'ave thought that I should 'ave touched lucky in the park! All along o' bein' tru'f'l, s'elp me if it ain't! I calls that real encouragement to go straight—till I'm pinched!" she added, grinning. Then, biting the piece of gold she disappeared among the trees.

In the meantime her benefactress had got half way down Piccadilly before she pulled herself up. The chance meeting with anyone who knew Melton had been an unexpected shock, but the terrible communication the dirty, ignorant, creature in the park had made to her had been a greater shock than she had felt able to bear.

Her only desire had been to tear herself away from the glance of those dark, evil eyes, to hide from the sound of that coarse, illiterate voice.

The woman in the park had been the wife of—of the man whose name she had not dared to breathe, lest it should be suddenly whirled away by the wind, and shrieked over the housetops till it reached the spinny in Melton Wood! That woman—his wife, then the "little girl" that was lost must have been——"

She bit her lips in an agony of shame, as she remembered how she had yearned to lay her head upon a mother's breast, to feel a mother's kiss upon her brow! Now the name she most dreaded was that of "Mother"!

"And he was going to find *her* for me!" she thought, with a bitter smile. "Thank God that he will never do so now! He will forget when he is better, while I——"

She shivered wearily. It was now nearly three weeks since she had flown, like a thief in the night, from all that she had loved. The long tramp across the country, in order to avoid Melton, to the further station of Chorlton, where she had waited for the London mail; her sole possessions a handbag and Sir Trevor's Christmas present to her of five pounds; that, and a few trinkets, given to her by the boy who had once been her lover, in the days when their love had promised so fair and sweet!

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She had come to London and had been fortunate in finding a kindly landlady, who let her have a small bedroom for five shillings a week, in the neighbourhood of Bloomsbury. Then there had begun a weary search for employment.

When the last of her little all began to diminish, she had paid an entrance fee at an agent's where posts were found as governesses, companions, and secretaries, but so far had met with no success.

Afraid of being traced by her own name, she had called herself "Ivy Lodge" in the books of the agents, and remembered with a start that she had received a typewritten letter from them that morning to call at the office in Cockspur Street at four in the afternoon. It was nearly that now, and after reassuring herself that she was not followed by the beggar in the park, she turned her steps in the direction of Cockspur Street.

Suddenly she stopped; the street boys were calling out the latest editions of the evening papers, and carried pink placards in front of them. One caught her eye; and the words she read in the huge letterpress were to her like a flaming sword of justice. She reeled like a drunken woman, and caught at a lamp-post to steady herself. The words that had roused her from her lethargy were:—

THE MELTON MURDER MYSTERY!
A Missing Link!
Where is Ivy Strange?

She felt her face flushing and paling with the sudden horror of being confronted by the sight of her own name on the long line of pink placards, and, to her own sensitive imagination, she seemed conscious that the passers-by looked at her suspiciously, as though they had already guessed the secret she had thought so secure.

An insane impulse seized her to stop and cry aloud that "Ivy Strange" was in their midst, and had run away from Melton because she was afraid to stay! But the impulse passed, and with quivering limbs and strained, hunted eyes, she made her way to the agent's office, hearing all the while the clamorous words that flared on the placards:—"Where is Ivy Strange?" "Where is Ivy Strange?"

In the waiting-room she regained a little of her self-control, but looked pale and frightened as she went into the inner office.

"Ah, Miss Lodge," said the lady clerk, regarding the trembling girl before her coldly. "I have a most exceptional post open for a secretaryship to an author. In fact, I would hesitate to have sent for you as you have no experience of any kind, were you not a good Latin scholar, but none of the ladies on my books just now are acquainted with the language. I am afraid, though, even now, that you look too delicate for the work."

The girl flung out her hands eagerly.

"Oh, no, don't say that! I am stronger than I look; indeed I am; and I will work so hard to please him if you give me the post. My languages are good, and I can easily learn to type. Besides, I understand shorthand."

She stopped abruptly, colouring hotly with the passion of words she had let loose from her heart. It was urgently imperative that she got this post, for now her store of ready money was perilously low, since she had been so liberal with the woman in the park.

A strange voice answered her—the voice of a grave, white-haired man, with sad, hollow eyes, and a sweet smile that spoke of past sufferings.

"I think this lady will suit me admirably, madam," he said slowly, looking at the girl with a puzzled expression: "she will regain her strength, perhaps, when her mind is at rest."

"Very well, Mr. Vivyan," replied the woman briefly; "of course, you are the first person to be consulted, and I am glad you came to choose for yourself, instead of letting me send them up to you." Then turning to Ivy, who stood listening in a tumult of relief, she said. "When will you be ready, Miss Lodge, to take up your duties?"

"I am ready now," she replied simply.

Mr. Vivyan rose. "Then you had better come to my house at Surbiton to-night, Miss—Miss Lodge," he said. "I have a housekeeper who will receive you, and to-morrow we can begin work. This is my address."

He handed her a card, and with a bow that included herself and the clerk, he left the office—a strangely distinguished figure that had "tragedy" writ all over it.

When he had gone Ivy glanced at the card and read:

Mr. Vernon Vivyan,
"*The Retreat*,"
Surbiton, S.W.

"I suppose you know who he is, Miss Lodge?" said the voice of the clerk.

"I am afraid I do not," she replied; "I have not been reading much lately."

"Then I will tell you," said the woman. "He is the author of that celebrated book 'The Pariah.' He has become the man of the hour, like Byron; for one morning he woke and found himself famous. You are very lucky to work for him.'

In the meantime, the man of the hour, Vernon Vivyan, was driving to Waterloo Station in a hansom. He was thinking about the face of the girl he had engaged as his secretary. It was so sad, so haunted by the intangible presence of fear—as his had been once—that immediately he had felt a wave of interest go out to her.

She seemed alone, isolated by Fate from the common daily intercourse with her fellow creatures—as he had been for so many awful years—that he was glad he could, in a small way, make her life a little less burdensome.

Besides, something in her had sent his thoughts backwards on a trail of painful memories. She had one or two little mannerisms—a lilt in the voice, a gesture with the hand, and a movement of the head—that reminded him of the one woman who had been, for a brief month, the Alpha and Omega of his life, and whose delicate soul had been crushed under the Juggernaut of shame until it had killed her, and with her—their child!

Nearly three months had passed since his book had been accepted, and published immediately afterwards, and from that hour he had not looked back.

The book, written with his life's blood, had, indeed, proved a life preserver, and now he was making money; and money to him did not spell luxury or forgetfulness, but—revenge, and the resurrection of a name that had been dead for nearly twenty years.

He had not sent his work into the world labelled by the name of an ex-convict, but had, for the furthering of his plans, adopted his first two names, "Vernon Vivyan," that in no way connected the once shabby, down-at-heel ticket-of-leave man, Vernon Grant, with the author of "The Pariah."

Invitations and offers of friendship he had quietly and firmly refused, his whole heart set on two objects—the work that was part of his soul, and the revenge that was part of his life. To see his enemy in the dust, and—for the sake of those dear dead—to stand an honourable man in the eyes of the world.

When Ivy "Lodge" reached the "Retreat" that evening, she was received by a mild-faced, motherly-looking woman, who showed her to her bedroom and the little sitting-room that had been reserved for her special use.

"Mr. Vivyan would like to see you after you have dined, miss" she said. "He will be in the study."

The girl, refreshed after a dainty meal and a warm bath, brushed her clustering, burnished hair, and fastened a piece of white lace round her neck, as a substitute for the more sedate appearance of the morning, then went slowly downstairs to the study of her employer.

She felt almost happy in the peaceful Surbiton villa, remote from the tear and bustle of London traffic and the title of her new home brought a flood of relief to her heart; for was she not seeking a "retreat" in very truth, where she might not be haunted by the flaming placards with their harsh demands to know where "Ivy Strange" was! Here she was safe, for no one would think of seeking for her in the house of the author, Vernon Vivyan.

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As she entered the study he rose to greet her, kindly, and with an awed deference, as though the society of a woman was a rare experience to him.

"I hope you have not been disagreeably impressed by the loneliness of the 'Retreat,' Miss Lodge." he said gently. "You are young, and youth loves Life's fanfare of trumpets, while I am old, and only care for the softened shades of life that mellow existence!"

"Oh, no," she said, eagerly; "I hate London. It frightens me, and reminds me of a great, big, human 'Zoo,' where all the animals try to outvie each other in making the greater noise."

He smiled. "Then you were not born within sound of Bow Bells? What part of the country do you come from, Miss Lodge?"

She turned a startled glance upon him. "I—I—come from the—north," she answered evasively; then went on hurriedly, "Did you wish to speak to me about my work, Mr. Vivyan?"

"I only wanted to tell you that I will dictate to you every day from ten to one and three to five," he said slowly. "Your time after those hours will be free to spend as you choose—with your friends or elsewhere."

"I have no friends," she said sadly. "When you do not require me I will be in my sitting-room."

"No friends!" he said, looking at her with interest. "It is an odd coincidence, Miss Lodge, but we are very similar in our circumstances! Are you an orphan?"

"Yes," she answered, with a slight shiver, thinking of the dirty tramp in the park. "I have no parents."

"Poor child!" he murmured, "poor child!" Then he added suddenly: "How old are you, Miss Lodge?"

"I shall be eighteen soon," the girl answered simply.

"Eighteen!" That would have been about the age of the child he had never seen! The child that had never lived to call him father! He could almost have imagined that this girl, with the strangely haunting eyes and manners of speech, might have resembled that child when a baby! Her presence was a painful pleasure to him, in recalling the years that had gone, the years that might have been!

He woke from his reverie with a start, to find his secretary waiting patiently in the room.

"We will begin my new book to-morrow, Miss Lodge," he said gently. "The title is already chosen; I am calling it 'Canker,' and although the subject is tragic," he added smilingly, "perhaps the writing of it may bring us both what we most need."

"Forgetfulness," the girl desired, and the man wrote to keep remembrance green.

The following day they began work, and for a week time passed busily, yet happily, in the "Retreat," for the two human souls so strenuously seeking a refuge from their pasts, those pasts as far apart as the poles, yet knit together in a tie closer than death!

"Miss Lodge," said Vernon Vivyan one morning, "I wonder if you would go to the Army and Navy Stores in Victoria Street for me, and order this list of stationery to be sent up, we shall want it soon?"

Agreeing readily, the girl started, glad of a chance to work for the kind, considerate man who was her master, yet never failed to treat her as a friend, rather than as a servant. His sad face and hungry-looking eyes—as though always searching for someone he never could find—filled her tender heart with a sense of sympathy and fellowship she could dimly feel without understanding.

She carried out her commission at the Stores, then went slowly down the steps, intending to get a 'bus to Waterloo Station.

Suddenly, as she stood on the threshold, a man in a hansom uttered an exclamation of mingled astonishment and exultation, as he caught a flashing glimpse of the slight, delicate girl in black, eyeing the traffic with wide, interested eyes.

It was the work of a moment to stop his hansom, run swiftly up the steps towards her, and take hold of her arm in a firm grip.

"Found at last, my little winged bird! At last my patience is rewarded!"

With a sickening feeling of deadly terror, Ivy raised her head sharply, and gazed into the dark, powerful face of the man she dreaded above all others—the man who knew most of the shameful secret of her life, and whom she had hoped never to meet again. It was Digby Scarlett, and he was looking down into her face with a grim smile of triumph and derision!

TWENTY-NINTH CHAPTER.

In Temptation's Grip.

She opened her mouth to speak, but horror froze her tongue to her palate, and she could only gaze at him dumbly.

"You are surprised, Ivy," he went on softly, his hand still holding her arm closely. "You do not seem so delighted as you should, considering that after all these weeks you have come face to face with your future *husband!*"

His words had the effect of loosening her speech.

"No, no!" she murmured; "that is all over, Mr. Scarlett. I can never keep my promise now. Let me go! Please let me go!"

His smile deepened, and his voice grew even more caressing as he said:

"Are you aware, my pretty Ivy, that you are wanted by the police in connection with the murder of the tramp in the spinny, and that, if I choose, I have just to lift my little finger and hail the nearest policeman and give you in charge?"

The girl's face blanched, and into her eyes there stole a look of horror and hunted fear as she returned the gaze of the man who held her liberty in his hand.

"How cruel you are!" she moaned, with quivering lips. "Can you not have a little mercy, and let me go? I am doing no harm; only trying to forget the past."

"Why did you run away," he said, softly, "if you were so innocent? Remember, little Ivy, I first did you a service in thrashing that same tramp when I found you in the wood together. You had a secret with him. I listened, and gathered——"

"Gathered what?" she said, with frightened eyes.

"That he was blackmailing you for some reason, and you were terrified lest he should betray you," he replied, watching her closely and noting the sudden gleam in her eyes. "Was that secret yours or—someone else's?"

"It was——" she began, then stopped abruptly. She could not tell what she knew for the dear sake of her lover. Rather anything than let Digby Scarlett guess the truth! "It was—mine!" she said, lifting her head with a haughty gesture. "Now, please let me go, Mr. Scarlett. I—I—am in a hurry."

"You shall not slip through my fingers again, Ivy," he smiled; "you shall either consent to marry me immediately or I shall give you up to the police! Ah, don't struggle, my pretty bird! I have you now, and your answer will decide your fate."

She bit her lip and cast a nervous glance round, as though to seek some way of escape from her custodian. At any cost he must not know where she was staying, for then she would know no peace of mind; and yet she dared not refuse to seem to be falling in with his wishes, or the alternative would be fatal.

"I will agree to your proposition," she said, in a low, strained voice, "on one condition—that you let me go now, and do not follow me. I will meet you to-morrow anywhere you like, but I can't stay now. Oh, please! If you have any regard for me whatever, let me go now!"

He looked at her curiously. Her opposition only increased her charm in his eyes. She reminded him of that other woman who had defied him so often, and sometimes successfully. Now the thought of bringing this girl to his feet was a joy that made him dizzy in anticipation of the working of his hatred upon the woman who had outwitted him so daringly.

When this girl was his wife, then he would drain the cup of vengeance to the dregs. But he would not lose sight of her. That would be too perilous a proceeding. Besides, he was

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curious to learn what she had been doing all the time she had been in London, while he had employed those weeks in searching high and low for her.

"Let me convince you that I am not your enemy, Ivy," he said, caressingly. "It is as much for my own sake as for yours that I wish to help you to evade the police, who are on the look out for you. Trust me! Be my wife!—and then, together, we will go to the sunny south of France, where all fear and misery will be over.

"As 'Ivy Strange,' the 'suspect,' your liberty is not worth a handful of salt; but as Mrs. Digby Scarlett, the rich woman, you will begin to live a new life, Ivy—a life of peace, sunshine, and love. For I do love you, little one, though I may express myself harshly at times. It is the knowledge that I am so far below you that makes me so.

"Come! Tell me that if I get a special license to-morrow, you will meet me and marry me; then we will leave the past behind us, and severing ourselves from all connection with—with the murdered man in the spinny, and obscure relations—only live for the future! Choose, Ivy, between the picture I have painted for you, or the dreary cell of a police-court and the shameful publicity that will follow!"

He paused, and with burning eyes and dilated nostrils waited for the girl by his side to answer him.

For a moment she was silent, carried away by the vehemence and passion of his pleading, and the prospect of the dreadful alternative that awaited her decision if it were not favourable.

She drew in her breath with a long-drawn sigh. If she could only forget the past, how much easier it would be—how much pain she would be spared!

Then, into the tumult of her thoughts, there came the picture of the unconscious form of Jack, the lover who had defended her from the insult of the man to whose wooing she was now half yielding, and there flooded into her heart a great glow of passionate tenderness for the boy she loved, though she might never see him again.

Was it possible, she wondered feverishly, to marry the man who inspired her with no other feeling but fear and hate, while her heart was bound up with another?

She looked round wildly, afraid to say the words that would bring disaster in their wake whichever form they took—whether acceptance or rejection!

"I—I—give me time," she murmured. "I cannot think now; my brain is in a whirl; this is so unexpected."

Digby Scarlett smiled. He almost fancied he had won, and the thought made him concede a point.

"I will give you five minutes," he said, "that will be ample time in which to make up your mind. Remember, your choice lies between myself and—the police! It rests with you whether you spend to-morrow evening in Bow Street cells, or at a hotel in Paris!"

She turned away, and gazed with unseeing eyes into the crowds of passing faces, that crossed and recrossed in an ever-recurring stream.

How to escape? How to frame the words that would satisfy this man and yet not implicate herself, was the question that kept reiterating in her brain.

Suddenly she uttered an exclamation, and made a sudden dart forward, but her arm was closely gripped by Digby Scarlett.

"Come! Your answer!" he said roughly. "Don't dare to play with me. In another moment I will summon that policeman, in whose society you will probably feel more at home than in mine!"

She turned a white face to him in which despair was largely written.

"How cruel you are! Do you consider it a manly thing to hound an innocent girl as you are doing? But since you have driven me to bay, I am forced to answer you. I will, on *one* condition, marry you, since it is, after all, only exchanging one gaoler for another," she said bitterly; "and that condition is that you tell me whether Jack Maitland is still—alive—or not? If he is—I cannot, even if I rest in a police cell, marry anyone else, for I love him! But if he is dead, then all men are alike to me, it matters not which one I marry!"

His dark, restless eyes flashed with a sudden rage, but he answered her glibly enough:

"Oh! I imagined you knew already; the poor chap died a week ago. It was in all the papers at the time."

Her eyes filled with a sudden mist, as she saw the sunset of her love, and the blow was doubly hard to bear because she heard it from the lips of the man whom she hated.

"Then I will marry you," she said slowly. "My address is——" She stopped suddenly. She could not give him her employer's address, that would be madness. She would instead give him the address of the room she had occupied in Bloomsbury. She had left no trail behind, and he would call only to find that the landlady was as much in the dark as himself.

"My address is," she went on, "18 Upper Guildford Street, Bloomsbury."

"I will go with you there," he said pleasantly. "We will take a hansom, and then can resume our conversation and discuss our marriage."

She shuddered, and, as he strolled towards a waiting hansom, threw a desperate glance round, that suddenly changed into an exclamation of startled joy, for coming towards her was the figure of the kindly man who had taken her into his house, and had been almost a father to her.

"Mr. Vivyan," she cried impulsively rushing towards him. "I want you! I want you!"

But the man to whom she appealed did not hear her cry. He was walking with that abstract look that betokens a mind wrapped in contemplation.

With a terrified glance the girl looked towards the man who held her liberty in his hands, and to her amazement saw that he had forgotten her existence for the time being, and was staring with a livid, frightened face, at the man to whom she had cried.

For a moment she paused, wondering at the strange expression on her enemy's face at the sight of the author, Mr. Vivyan.

Did he know him? she wondered. Or was he acquainted with the fact that she was Mr. Vivyan's secretary?

With a sudden bound she leapt into a passing hansom, and as she drove off, Digby Scarlett, roused from his strange abstraction, darted after her, with a savage exclamation, into the middle of the road, but the hansom had disappeared in the tide of traffic, and he was obliged to return to the pavement, or risk being run over.

"Anyway, I have her address," he muttered. "I will find her later. But that man! To see him, above all others, well-dressed, prosperous, and within a stone's throw of his—daughter! What does it mean? Except," and he shivered—"except bad luck for me!"

Then he followed swiftly the man whom he feared.

That same evening Digby Scarlett made a discovery and an appointment. The discovery was the address of the author, Vernon Vivyan; and the appointment was with a man named Steeve Lampit, the proprietor of a low doss-house down the river way, near Rotherhithe, who did shady deeds for a still more shady price.

THIRTIETH CHAPTER.

The Deed in the Dark.

When Ivy reached the "Retreat," her heart was in a flutter of fear lest she should have been followed by Digby Scarlett.

That he would do his utmost to trace her she knew only too well, and also feared that in his wrath at having been outwitted, he would give information to the police about her presence in London; or, on the other hand, he might have followed Mr. Vivyan, and acquainted him with the fact that his secretary was none other than the "wanted" Ivy Strange; and then once more she would be an outcast, the child of a criminal, and a pariah, branded by the bar-sinister of the broad arrow!

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When Vernon Vivyan came into the room later, she started to her feet, eager to know the worst—that he had decided to dispense with her services there and then. But his face wore the same kindly expression, and in his voice there was the caressing deference it always had when he spoke to her.

She sighed with relief. For a little while longer then she had a roof over her head. Fate had staved off the blow this time.

"You look tired, Miss Lodge," he said. "I hope your journey to town has not knocked you up?"

"No, thank you, Mr. Vivyan," she replied simply. "I am not very tired."

"I am glad," he smiled, "for I wish you to preside at my dinner-table to-night; I have a guest coming."

"A guest?" she murmured, with frightened eyes and trembling lips. "Is it a lady?"

He shook his head. "No, Miss Lodge, you are the only lady I have spoken to for many years. It is a man whom I met quite recently. He has taken rather an interest in my first novel; and though I would prefer not to invite him here, I feel compelled to offer him some sort of hospitality; and as I belong to no club, the 'Retreat' is the only place to which I can ask him."

She made no response; a horrible dread was making her dumb with fear. Suppose this man was the one from whom she had fled earlier in the morning! Suppose when she descended into the dining-room she came face to face with Digby Scarlett!

She turned desperately to him. "Oh, you have not told me the name of—your guest, Mr. Vivyan," she murmured, forcing a smile to her lips. "I should like to know it."

"Do not be afraid, Miss Lodge," he said quickly. "He is no one who will need an unusual display of costumes. He is a Mr. Heath, from California, over here for a short time."

She breathed softly. How foolish it was to have imagined that it should be Digby Scarlett!

Later, when she entered the dining-room—a slim, girlish figure in black, with wide, violet eyes, and a waving abundance of copper-tinted hair—the man standing beside Vernon Vivyan started as though he had been confronted by a ghost.

"Let me introduce you to my secretary, Miss Lodge," his host said smilingly. "Miss Lodge, this is Mr. Ernest Heath."

The girl bowed silently, noting the shrewd, kindly face of the guest, lit by a pair of keen, blue eyes, and a humorous smile.

At dinner she was very quiet, listening to the two men discussing the different questions of the day; when suddenly the guest of the evening said something that sent the lights in the room whirling round and round in wild disorder, while a strange surging sound buzzed in her ears.

"I see, in the evening papers," Ernest Heath was saying, "that the police are confident of securing the girl concerned in the Melton murder mystery."

Vernon Vivyan raised his eyebrows. "I am afraid I have not read the subject up," he said carelessly. "Who is the girl?"

"Oh, that is not quite clear," said the other. "Her antecedents are at present under a cloud. But her name is Ivy Strange."

The tortured girl took up a glass of water, and put it to her burning lips. The horror of hearing her awful secret discussed so coolly made her want to shriek it aloud, and defy them to betray her! But she sat calmly in her seat, forcing herself to listen.

"Ivy Strange!" Vernon Vivyan murmured. "What a pretty name! And uncommon, too! By the way," he said, turning to his secretary, "your name is 'Ivy' also, is it not, Miss Lodge?"

She moved her lips, but they had grown stiff with fear, and no sound would come forth, except a faint murmur.

"Do you feel ill?" he said quickly. "If so, Miss Lodge, we will excuse you; you ought to go to your room and rest; you have had a long day."

(*Continued overleaf.*)

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She rose unsteadily to her feet, conscious of the keen scrutiny of those piercing blue eyes that watched her with a cynical smile, tearing away the veil from her innermost thoughts.

"Thank you," she murmured; "I feel rather faint—if you will excuse me." With a mechanical bow she went to the door, which was held open by Mr. Heath.

"I trust the effect of the—heat will soon pass off, Miss Lodge," he said politely; but his words sent a shiver through the girl.

When they were alone, the guest said quietly: "How long has Miss Lodge been with you, Vivyan?"

The other started. "Oh, a couple of weeks, nearly," he replied carelessly. "Why do you ask?"

Ernest Heath was silent for a time; many thoughts were passing through his brain.

Then aloud he said: "Oh, nothing, only she reminds me strangely of a cousin whom I last saw about her age—nearly twenty years ago now; but this girl is exactly like Maggie was before I went to California."

Vernon Vivyan started. "Maggie!" Strange that there should be yet another woman in the world with the same haunting eyes of his secretary! "Maggie——" Then he suddenly saw a red mist before his eyes, as a thought rose and shaped itself in his mind.

This man's name was Heath! He had not noticed it at first in the excitement of becoming famous, and the name was a common one. But "Maggie" might stand for "Margaret," and——

"Tell me," he said, lighting a cigar with a shaking hand; "what was the name of your cousin?"

"Margaret Heath—the same surname as my own," replied the other. "I heard she married afterwards. Then, when I came home the first time and called on the old aunt, I found her dead, and so lost all trace of Maggie's married name."

Vernon Vivyan was silent. He could have told the transatlantic rancher the latest details regarding his beautiful cousin of twenty years ago; but they would have been such details as would cause him to rise and revile the man who was his host—the man whose shame had been the means of killing two human souls!

"Well, I have much to do to-morrow," said his guest, after a while; "I shall look you up again after my visit north, Vivyan. It will only be for a few days."

"Where are you going?" said Vivyan, rising also.

"Up into Leicestershire, to visit a famous Manor, known as Maitland Manor," replied his friend. "But the odd thing is," he went on, "the Maitlands are the people who have since had so much trouble over the murder of the man in the spinny, and the missing girl, Ivy Strange, is a foundling they brought up. I am rather interested in Lady Maitland also."

Vernon Vivyan was silent. He had no interest in the history of the unknown Maitlands, who moved in a sphere far apart from his own. His thoughts were set on the strange coincidence that he should be entertaining the only relative of his dead wife, Margaret, and the agony it was to hear Ernest Heath dilating on possible likenesses.

As his guest strolled towards Surbiton station, he murmured aloud:

"That girl puzzles me. Her terror was so apparent, and she was so obviously afraid of me, that I almost believe that the secret the police are searching for is to be found in my friend's house. Her description tallies exactly with that of the missing girl, too."

In the meantime, Vernon Vivyan was reading a letter that had arrived by the last post. It was typewritten, and ran:—

The writer has a trinket belonging to your dead wife, Margaret Grant, and a photo of her baby girl. Both will be given to you if you will be outside the "Great Dane" Inn, Rotherhithe, at half-past eleven to-morrow night.

"How does this correspondent know my new name and address?" he wondered feverishly. "It must be someone who has watched me for a long time! God bless whoever it is, for giving me the chance of possessing something of my dead Margaret's and our child! I will go to-morrow!"

Pressing the paper to his lips, he murmured again: "It's a strange place for an appointment, but I will be there!"

* * * * *

The sky overhead was dark and murky, and the fresh breeze from the river blew keenly in the nostrils of the man who waited in the shadow of the "Great Dane" riverside inn at Rotherhithe.

Suddenly a step came along, and a tall, dark form stood irresolute outside.

"Mr. Vivyan?" whispered the man hoarsely. Then receiving a reply in the affirmative, he said quickly: "Come this way, sir. She doesn't like the glare of the public. She'll be lower down, near the wharf."

He hurried the visitor along by his arm, staving off impatient questions of the new-comer with grunts; and after a time the river came in sight, dark and turgid, lit by the red lights of sleeping barges.

Suddenly the man stopped with a cry, and tried to pull his arm out of the grasp of the taciturn ruffian by his side.

"Where are you taking me to?" he said quickly. "Tell me at once."

He stopped; another form had risen out of the gloom, and bore down upon them.

"What can I do for you, Mister?" he said, with a grin, "a cold bath, or——"

Flinging out his arm wildly, Vernon Vivyan struck the man nearest to him a blow between the eyes that sent him down like an ox. Then, before he had time to turn or cry out for help, a sudden crash descended on his head with a sickening thud. His hat was knocked off, and under the weight of the blow he staggered and fell on to his knees.

Then, as he tried to rise and meet his assailant, two strong arms gripped him round the waist as in a vice, and struggling, writhing, and panting, the two men rolled together towards the river.

(Another long instalment next week.)

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The various official investigations into the reported increase in the percentage of deaf people are well described in the last number of the *Review of Ear, Nose, and Throat Diseases.* The methods used in testing the hearing are also explained, and as they are simple, the reader is advised to apply them at once, for it is now becoming well known that a very large number of people are partially deaf without realising it. As even a slight defect in hearing may suddenly develop into a marked form of deafness, such conditions should be guarded against. The *Review* shows how this may be done, and to place the knowledge within the reach of all, the Editor will post a free copy to anyone sending name and address. With the *Review* there is also a Report Form, by means of which anyone can obtain free advice on any case of deafness, or ear, nose, or throat ailments. All communications should be addressed to the Editor, Drouet Institute, 10, Marble Arch, London, W. The Editor advises patients, however, when possible, to visit the Drouet Institute for a personal consultation with the medical staff. Consulting hours are—in the morning, 10 to 12, and in the afternoon, 2 to 4, week days only. A fee of five shillings is charged for personal consultations.

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No Fear of Bashfulness.

Ethel (who thinks her country cousin nervous): "Can't you find anything better to squeeze than a felt hat?" Country Cousin: "Wait a bit. I'm only reducin' my energy, for fear I might hurt you."

An Inspiration!

She (poetically): "With this golden bright sky, the sighing of the balmy zephyrs, and the far vista across the foamy waves, one can't but dream they are in sweetest Italy." He: "Good idea! Suppose we have macaroni for dinner!"

John Thought he Was a Model.

Mrs. Foleigh: "Oh, John, the paper is offering a prize for a description of a model husband." Mr. Foleigh: "You want to have a try at it?" Mrs. Foleigh: "Yes, please." Mr. Foleigh: "All right. Just get the pen, ink, and paper and I'll dictate to you."

The Process was Unsatisfactory.

"Young man," said a stern old professor to a student who had been charged with kissing one of his daughters. "Young man, don't get into that habit. You'll find that kissing is like eating soup with a fork." "How so, sir?" asked the student. "Because," answered the stern old professor, "you can't get enough of it."

Smart Husband, that.

"Well, my dear," said he, as he was dressing, "I s'pose you were right when you told me last night that there were burglars in the house." "Why?" "Because all the money that was in my pockets when I went to bed is gone." "Well, if you'd been brave and got up and shot the wretch you'd have had your money this morning." "Possibly—but then I should have been a widower." She gave him back half his money.

A New Line of Defence.

"So you deny that you ever asked my client to marry you or that you promised to marry her?" queried the counsel for the plaintiff in a breach of promise case, with a comprehensive gesture and an air of surprised incredulity. "No, sir, I admit it," responded the defendant promptly. "You admit it," shouted the lawyer, leaping to his feet and casting a triumphant look about the court-room. "Yes, I admit it, but the conversation alluded to occurred on Sunday evening, and I believe contracts made on that day are void."

The Favour She Asked.

"Papa, do you know this is my eighteenth birthday?" "Yes, my dear." "Papa, I want you to do me a great favour on my birthday," and the beautiful girl buried her glowing face on the paternal bosom. "And what is the favour my little girl wants?" "Papa, you have influence with the Town Council, haven't you?" "Well, yes, my dear." "Then have them move that gas-lamp away from in front of our gate." Thus it was that the fond father discovered that a daughter isn't a little girl always. She had a young man.

The Objective Case.

"If I were to offer to marry you," said a particularly disagreeable young man to a pretty young lady, "in what case should I find you?" "In the objective," she sweetly replied.

Hadn't Time for Himself.

"Oh, yes," she said, as they were conversing, "I have studied your character, and I think you are above the average of men." "I don't think much of myself," he answered. "Why not?" "Because I'm always thinking about you."

The Feelings were Chronic.

She (gushingly): "There are days when we seem more in unison with Nature than at other times; when our hearts seem to beat in accord with the sublime harmony of the universe. Have you ever noticed it?" He: "Indeed I have. It is always that way with me on pay day."

Taking No Risks.

He (shortly after the introduction): "Excuse me, miss, but do you think you could ever love me if—well—if you should try?" She: "Well, I must say this is——" He: "Oh, don't be offended. It cost me more than £100 to find out whether the last one loved me or not, and I've got to economise, you know."

His Reason was Practical.

Officer's Wife (fondly): "Do you remember, John, how you used of an evening to hold my hand—my sweet little roseleaf you used to call it, you funny boy—for hours and hours. How silly, silly my old boy used to be!" Old Boy (grumpily): "Nonsense, Jane, don't be stupid. I was always practical and business-like. I did that just to keep you from the piano."

Risky Economy.

Wife: "But, my dear, we can't afford to stay at home this summer." Husband (in surprise): "Good gracious, can't afford it? Why, we owe the butcher, the baker, the candle-stick maker, and everybody else, and haven't a farthing to pay them with." Wife: "Yes, but if they saw we couldn't afford to go away they would come down on us for the money, and we would have to go either into bankruptcy or starve to death."

Another Sort of Trial.

They had tried all the penny-in-the-slot machines on the pier, until at last they came to one that didn't respond to the magic bronze. "Look here, my man," said Crumbles to the pier attendant, "that machine is to try your weight; the next your strength; then your sight; and now I've put a penny in this thing, but I didn't see what it's for." "That, sir," replied the pierman; "oh, that's one to try your temper, sir." And it did.

A Ruse that Succeeded.

Miss Jinks was out walking with an admirer on each side. A storm came on, accompanied by lightning. Jones said he was frightened. Brown thought it a capital opportunity to show off his superior courage before the adored one. "What are you frightened at? I am as cool as can be." "Yes, I should not fear," replied Jones, "if you and I were alone, but I am afraid of Miss Jinks in this lightning, she is so attractive." Brown is still a bachelor, but Jones is not.

Got Him this Time.

Mrs. DeCourcey: "By the way, Pauline, as I passed the drawing-room last evening I heard you and Mr. Millions engaged in an animated discussion on some question. What was it about?" Pauline DeCourcey: "Why, you see, ma, he was trying to maintain that in spite of a short acquaintance it was a girl's duty to kiss her acknowledged lover." Mrs. DeCourcey: "Well, the idea! I never heard of such audacity. Of course you upset his argumentative fabric?" Pauline: "I did, ma. I convinced him in no time that it was the lover's duty to kiss the girl, and while he did it Johnny took the photo. Oh! he can't break away now!"

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Conducted by CYNTHIA.

[In this page are answered any letters from readers dealing with affairs of the heart, tangles in domestic life, or points of etiquette. All communications must be addressed to Miss Cynthia Hamilton, c/o the Editor of SHORT STORIES.*]*

Signs of Admiration.

How can a girl tell when young men admire her? "E. M. C." is sixteen, and knows very few of the opposite sex. Her parents are very strict, and do not allow her to go out much. There are several young men who look at her when they meet her out. But they do not try to get an introduction. Do they really admire her, or is it her fancy? "E. M. C." has been told several times that she is pretty.

* * * * *

It is a way with young men, "E. M. C.," to look at a pretty girl. They do not always mean that they really admire her, not as would-be lovers, that is to say. If you are pretty, you will have to endure the gaze of the opposite sex. It is generally those who have the least intentions, too, that stare the most at a girl.

* * * * *

You should avoid anything like staring back at these young men, as no pretty girl should cheapen herself. One of these days, the right kind of young man will see you and admire you, and, depend on it, if he is really worth anything, he will find some other way of getting to know you than trying to attract your attention outdoors.

❦❦❦

An Awkward Position.

"JACK" writes to tell me a curious example of parental interference. Some years ago, a new manager came to his people's business, and brought his family with him. "JACK" fell in love with the eldest daughter, and all went well until a few months back, when an unpleasantness took place between the manager and "JACK'S" principal. "JACK'S" people now wish him to break off his engagement with the girl, and are trying their utmost to get her to consent to doing so. If "JACK" persists, he would be unable to bring his wife to meet his relations, and runs the risk of being "cut off with a shilling."

* * * * *

As you say, "JACK," it is unfair to vent the unpleasantness with the girl's father on you and your sweetheart. But the case is one which calls for delicate handling. It would not do to appear to be taking the part of one who has quarrelled with your own people. I advise you to allow matters to lapse for a while between you and your sweetheart—at any rate while there is still any heat between the parties.

* * * * *

Don't break the engagement off, but agree not to see each other for a while. In course of time the incident will be forgotten and probably the girl's father will have gone to live elsewhere. Then, there would be no harm in your bringing about a social reconciliation, even if business relations ceased between the father and your relatives. It would, however, be unwise to fly in the face of those to whom you are bound by interest.

Going to a Wedding.

YES, "H. G.," if you accept an invitation to a wedding it is usual to take or send a wedding-present. You say the engaged couple are only slight acquaintances of yours. Well, in that case, if you cannot afford a good present I think it would be better to send your congratulations by telegraph, or letter, and not to be present in person.

❦❦❦

A Choice of Two Loves.

"DEPRESSED" is thirty-six, and engaged to a girl of seventeen. Lately he has met another lady, this time aged twenty-seven, and, since meeting her, finds that his former love is dwindling somewhat. He is becoming passionately fond of the older lady. Should he break off the engagement with the first one?

* * * * *

I cannot imagine a case where an engagement could be better broken off. The second lady is nearer your own age, probably more experienced, and is therefore more likely to make you a good wife than a young girl. Besides, it would be cruel to the latter to continue engaged to her if your affection has gone. However, I strongly disapprove of your changeable views, and only hope that if you do break off the engagement the young lady will be the gainer, and will meet someone nearer her own age, and of a less fickle disposition.

❦❦❦

A Too Poetic Lover.

"RHODA" suffers from a too poetic sweetheart. All his love letters are couched in verse, and though he pays "RHODA" some very beautiful compliments, she thinks they would be more sincere if uttered in ordinary prose. What do I think about it?

* * * * *

Well, if I were "RHODA," I should certainly grow a little weary of love-letters in verse, especially if the verse were not particularly good or original. If "RHODA'S" sweetheart wants her to take compliments to herself in poetic form, he had much better present her with marked copies of the great poets. When he wishes to say the right things himself, it would be far more genuine to express them in ordinary prose. If I were "RHODA" I should ask her lover to try his hand at commonplace letter-writing to see how he got on, though he might, if he liked, drop into poetry occasionally when so inclined.

❦❦❦

Should Lovers Write About Business?

"BELLA" has a love-letter trouble of quite a different character. Her swain is a prosperous shopkeeper in a provincial town. He writes to "BELLA" every day, but instead of poetic raptures, he tells her all about the day's business, what kind of customers have called, how much they have ordered, and what business troubles he has had. "BELLA" asks me if I think he ought to tell her so much about business matters, and if I think a lover ought to write in this way?

* * * * *

I admire "BELLA'S" young man far more than the poetic type. After all, their future happiness must depend much on his success in business, and it is only right "BELLA" should know the ins and outs, so as to be able to give her help and advice when they are married.

* * * * *

I know one tradesman who owed his success in building up a large business entirely to the interest taken by his young and pretty wife in the concern. She regularly opened all the letters, and having a keen woman's insight, lifted many a load from her husband's shoulder, and by sheer tact and good sense brought about many a big order. Let "BELLA" imitate her example and show as much interest as she can in her future husband's business affairs.

Cynthia

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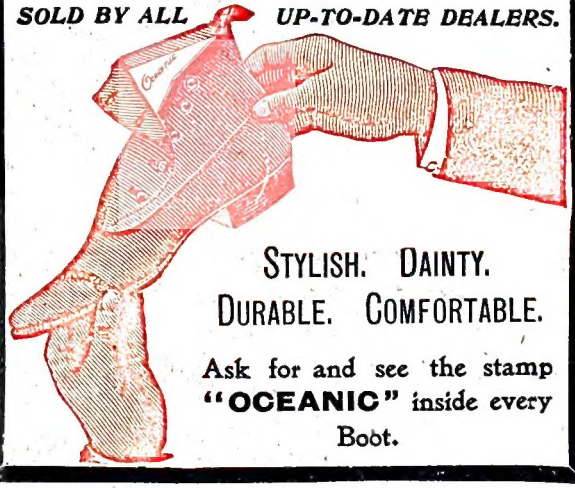

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